



Managing the intangible: Role of the communications function in corporate reputation work in public business-to-business companies

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Emilia Mikola
Aalto University School of Business
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Author Emilia Mikola

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Abstract

Objective of the Study

The objective of this research was to study how the communications function is involved in building and managing corporate reputation in Finnish public business-to-business (B2B) companies, especially in the current, turbulent social media environment. The main research question of the study was: What is the role of the communications function in corporate reputation work in Finnish business-to-business companies? The main research question was approached with three sub-questions: (1) How do communications and human resources professionals perceive corporate reputation?, (2) What are the communications function's tasks and responsibilities in reputation work?, and (3) How is social media used in the reputation work of business-to-business companies?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study followed a qualitative research approach. Empirical data were gathered through 11 semi-structured thematic research interviews with communications and human resources (HR) professionals from six public B2B companies. HR was included in order to gain a more thorough view of the research topic. The theoretical framework of the study was constructed based on the research questions and previous literature. The framework illustrates how the communications function is involved in managing corporate reputation, especially in the online environment where reputation is continuously co-created and re-structured by the company and its stakeholders.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings of this study showed a strong emphasis on internal communication and employees' significance in reputation work. Many companies had started employee ambassadorship programs to strengthen their reputation. Employer branding was also practiced, but the B2B companies did not actively try to engage their stakeholders online or monitor the social media environment. In light of the findings, communications' role in reputation work seems to be to increase positive awareness of the company among stakeholders, manage issues effectively, and create favorable conditions for employees to be ambassadors of reputation. The findings suggest B2B companies' reputation work should: (1) exploit employees' work-related social media use, (2) increase social media monitoring and measuring, and (3) emphasize relationship building and stakeholder engagement online.

Keywords corporate reputation, corporate communication, social media, reputation work, communications function

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Tutkimuksen tavoitteet

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli tutkia, miten viestintäyksikkö on mukana rakentamassa ja hallitsemassa yrityksen mainetta erityisesti nopeatempoisessa sosiaalisen median ympäristössä suomalaisissa, pörssilistatuissa business to business -yrityksissä (B2B eli yritykset, joiden asiakkaat ovat toisia yrityksiä). Tutkimuksen päätutkimuskysymys oli: Mikä on viestintäyksikön rooli mainetyössä suomalaisissa business to business -yrityksissä? Päätutkimuskysymykseen pyrittiin vastaamaan kolmen alakysymyksen avulla: (1) Miten viestinnän ja henkilöstöhallinnon ammattilaiset kokevat yritysmaineen?, (2) Mitkä ovat viestintäyksikön tehtävät ja vastuut mainetyössä? ja (3) Miten sosiaalista mediaa käytetään business to business -yritysten mainetyössä?

Tutkimusmenetelmä ja teoreettinen viitekehys

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin 11 puolistrukturoidulla teemahaastattelulla viestinnän ja henkilöstöhallinnon (HR) ammattilaisten kanssa kuudesta B2B-pörssiyrityksestä. HR sisällytettiin tutkimukseen, jotta tutkimusaiheesta saataisiin vielä kokonaisvaltaisempi kuva. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys muodostettiin tutkimuskysymysten sekä aikaisempien tutkimusten pohjalta. Viitekehys esittää, miten viestintäyksikkö osallistuu yrityksen maineenhallintaan, etenkin sosiaalisen median ympäristössä jossa yritys ja sen sidosryhmät yhdessä luovat ja neuvottelevat mainetta jatkuvasti.

Tutkimuksen tulokset ja johtopäätökset

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että B2B-yritykset painottavat sisäisen viestinnän ja työtekijöiden tärkeyttä mainetyössä. Useat yrityksistä olivat aloittaneet työntekijälähettiläysohjelmia maineensa vahvistamiseksi. Myös työnantajamielikuvan rakentamista harjoitettiin laajasti, mutta yritykset eivät aktiivisesti pyrkineet sitouttamaan sidosryhmiä kanavissaan tai seuraamaan sosiaalista mediaa. Tulosten valossa viestintäyksikön tehtävä mainetyössä vaikuttaa olevan yrityksen positiivisen näkyvyyden lisääminen sidosryhmien keskuudessa, kriittisten teemojen ja kriisien tehokas hallitseminen sekä sopivien olosuhteiden luominen työntekijöiden mainelähettiläydellemme. Tulosten perustella B2B-yritysten kannattaisi mainetyössään: (1) hyödyntää työtekijöiden työhön liittyvää sosiaalisen median käyttöä, (2) lisätä sosiaalisen median seurantaa ja mittaamista, ja (3) panostaa suhteiden luomiseen ja sidosryhmien sitouttamiseen sosiaalisessa mediassa.

Avainsanat yritysmaine, yritysviestintä, sosiaalinen media, mainetyö, viestintäyksikkö

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, corporate reputation has received increased attention in both academia and practice (see e.g. Helm 2007; Shamma 2012). Building and maintaining a positive corporate reputation is imperative in today's environment that is characterized by high expectations of stakeholders, the expansion of social media, and increased requirements for transparency (Shamma 2012; Dijkmans et al. 2015). Reputation matters since the success of companies is increasingly determined by what stakeholders think of the company and its operations (Malmelin 2007).

Reputation is fragile, and one mistake can ruin a company's reputation for years or even forever, affecting every aspect of its business. One of the most famous reputation crises happened to British Petroleum (BP) in 2010, when a massive oil spill in BP's oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico caused a major maritime disaster (De Wolf & Mejri 2013). The clean-up and business recovery costs of the crisis amounted to multiple billions, and BP still suffers from costs related to the loss of reputation (Floreddu et al. 2014). A very recent example is automotive brand Volkswagen, which in the end of 2015 admitted having manipulated its vehicles' exhaust emissions during government testing. Again, in addition to having to cope with recalls, buybacks, and multiple lawsuits resulting from the crisis, the company has to regain its reputation and customer's trust to ultimately survive from the crisis (see e.g. Costa 2015).

Today, social media has enabled crises to originate and spread even faster, and crises can evolve from situations they would not have before. One of the earliest crises that showed the power of social media was the one of United Airlines (see e.g. Aula 2010). In 2008, the airline broke a passenger's expensive guitar during a flight and refused to give any compensation. The passenger composed a song of the incident and uploaded it on video sharing channel YouTube, where it reached millions of people in just a few days and spread to other social media channels as well as to traditional media. The company – which after this responded with a settlement offer – suffered severe damage on its reputation (Aula 2010). Hence, managing reputation effectively both online and offline is highly important for any company.

1.1 Current understanding of reputation work in academic literature

Scholars agree that superior reputation has a positive influence on different aspects in business (Sarstedt et al. 2013; Goldring 2015). Corporate reputation is regarded as one of the firm's most valued intangible assets, which gives it a competitive advantage (see e.g. Roberts & Dowling 2002; Raithel & Schwaiger 2015). Reputation can help a company to differentiate itself from its competitors, enhancing trust and loyalty, creating preference among stakeholder groups, and enabling it to lure best customers and employees (Dowling 2004; Forman & Argenti 2005; Melewar 2008). Moreover, research has shown that reputation is linked to higher financial performance, such as increased stock price and lower cost of capital (Saxton 1998; Roberts & Dowling 2002).

Corporate reputation is, however, an ambiguous concept, and researchers have yet to agree on a uniform definition of the term (Gotsi & Wilson 2001; Shamma 2012). One of the most cited definitions of corporate reputation is the one by Charles Fombrun, who conceptualizes reputation as “a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to key constituents compared to other leading rivals” (Fombrun 1996, p. 72). This definition, along with many others, emphasizes that reputation is formed on perceptions, that it is an aggregate perception of all stakeholders, and that it combines a firm's past actions, current state, and future prospects (e.g. Walker 2010; Dowling & Moran 2012).

What researchers do agree on, is that strong reputations stem from acting responsibly, i.e. doing the work well in the eyes of stakeholders (Murray & White 2005; Aula & Mantere 2008, p. xi; Dowling & Moran 2012). Dowling and Moran (2012) highlight that actions should emerge from the strategy of the company in order for it to acquire a superior reputation. Strategy should be built within an organization, and not emerge from non-core tactics unrelated to strategy, i.e. be bolted on (Dowling & Moran 2012).

However, the expansion of digital media in the past ten years has had a dramatic impact on reputation management (Cornelissen 2014; Dijkmans et al. 2015). In today's social

media environment, individuals are increasingly the ones creating, sharing, and discussing the content, and not companies (Jones et al. 2009; Kietzmann et al. 2011). This interactivity and the inability to manage the content has made it nearly impossible for companies to control the conversations on social media channels, but still, the popularity of social media has made it a platform that companies cannot ignore (Aula 2010). And they should not, since organizational reputations are increasingly shaped by the content that stakeholders come across specifically on social media (Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Indeed, effective communication on social media and other platforms is key in building and managing reputation. Forman and Argenti (2005) note that a firm's reputation is highly influenced by the effectiveness of the corporate communications (CC) function. According to Saxton (1998), the CC function has the responsibility of influencing stakeholders' perceptions of the company, i.e. the company's reputation. Burke (1998) goes even further arguing that one of the primary roles of CC is "to sustain, foster and develop an organization's reputation". However, even if communications is considered an organizational asset, its ultimate significance as a success factor depends, according to Malmelin (2007), on the way communications' role is actually understood in organizations. Before, communications has often been considered a supportive function, but this should shift to regarding communications as an increasingly important factor "leading and coaching the company" (Malmelin 2007). Thus, it is essential to consider the role of communications to better understand the development of strong reputations (Fombrun & Rindova 1998; Forman & Argenti 2005), especially in an era of changing media landscape (Cornelissen 2014).

A recent study, initiated by four Finnish associations of communications professionals, clarified the current state of communication and communications practitioners in Finnish organizations (Taloustutkimus 2015). The study revealed that reputation and brand building as well as social media related duties have become significantly more important in communication work within the last few years. When in 2013 18% of the respondents said that reputation and brand building were among their most important tasks, in 2015 the percentage was 37%. (Taloustutkimus 2015.) These results are consistent with those of the European Communication Monitor (ECM) 2015 survey, conducted among

communications professionals in Europe (Zerfass et al. 2015). In the ECM 2015 survey, the respondents perceived communications' main role in reaching organizational objectives to be building immaterial assets, i.e. reputation, brands and organizational culture. Moreover, the communicators indicated that the most important way for them to argue for the relevance and value of communications to top management is to explain the positive effects of good reputation, brands, and organizational culture. (Zerfass et al. 2015.) These results show that reputation is a current and important theme for communications practitioners as well.

Dowling (2006) outlines three important roles that CC plays in driving good corporate reputation: external communication, issues management, and internal communication. With external communication, the objective is to raise awareness and generate appreciation towards the company among stakeholders, while the second role refers to having to occasionally explain or defend the company's actions. Finally, internal communication has an important role in creating good reputation by engaging employees through e.g. clarifying the company's mission and the employees' role in it. (Dowling 2006.) Forman and Argenti (2005) add that a company can create competitive advantage by using communications to form long-term relationships with its stakeholders and by socializing them to its culture, since stakeholders are the ones who shape the firm's reputation. Malmelin (2007) emphasizes the importance of relationships as well. According to him, businesses depend increasingly on their success on communications, as well as on interacting and forming relationships with customers, partners, and other stakeholders.

Social media has facilitated companies' abilities to interact with stakeholders. Consequently, it has expanded reputation management to encompass also the digital environment. By online reputation management, researchers refer to the process that includes creating shareable content, interacting with stakeholders online, monitoring what they are saying, and addressing the possible negative content, in the aim of achieving enhanced trustworthiness and stakeholder commitment as well as positive attitude towards the company, i.e. good reputation (Jones et al. 2009; Dijkmans et al. 2015). Social media enables engaging stakeholders in the company's activities by facilitating

relationship building, cooperation and dialogue between the organization and its stakeholders (Dijkmans et al. 2015). Involving stakeholders in the company's activities is important, since engaged stakeholders can help companies e.g. in gathering ideas for developing new products or modifying some existing ones, and they are more likely to create and disseminate (positive) information about the company, which contribute to the long-term reputation of the firm (van Doorn et al. 2010).

Although social media is today a part of nearly every organization's external communication, business-to-business (B2B) companies have been slower to adopt social media than business-to-consumer (B2C) companies, mainly because perceiving it to lack relevance in their industries (Michaelidou et al. 2011; Jussila et al. 2014). Hence, research on corporate social media utilization has focused largely on the B2C sector. However, the rapid spread of social media is now demanding also B2Bs to engage in it and is consequently changing the way they communicate.

Therefore, the purpose of the present research is to uncover the role of communications in corporate reputation work in B2B companies. The topic stems from the increased attention that corporate reputation has in recent years received in both academia and practice (see e.g. Helm 2007; Shamma 2012). Today, in the world of numerous competing products and services, a company's success rests increasingly on what customers and other stakeholders think about it – i.e. on the company's reputation (Malmelin 2007). It has also been argued that reputations are largely affected by the content stakeholders encounter on social media (Kietzmann et al. 2011), which highlights the importance of understanding what are the communicational activities used in the effort of managing reputation. Moreover, it is important to study the social media use of B2Bs in general, and also related specifically to reputation management, since relationships and reputations are likely even more important determinants in purchase decisions in the B2B sector than in the B2C sector.

Furthermore, quite extensive prior research has been conducted on the importance of communications in reputation work overall, but hardly any empirical studies exist on the reputation management related social media activities carried out by the CC function,

especially in the B2B context (see, however, Floreddu et al. 2014 & Dijkmans et al. 2015). Thus, there is a gap between the identified importance of the CC function in reputation work, and descriptive accounts of the actual reputation management practices, especially on social media. Van Bekkum et al. (2008, p. 84) have called for research describing the communicational steps and decisions as well as the actual activities carried out by companies with strong reputations, since prior research has for the most part focused on the outcomes of the communications activities. The present research will partially answer that call, as it studies particularly the reputation work related activities carried out by the CC function. However, instead of focusing only on companies with strong reputations, this research comprises companies with both stronger and weaker reputations in the aim of uncovering possible differences in the reputation work of companies with different levels of reputation.

The present study is positioned in the field of corporate communication, and the interest is in examining the activities performed by the corporate communications function to build and maintain positive reputation, especially on social media platforms. According to van Riel's (1995) definition, corporate communication comprises management communication, marketing communication, and organizational communication. Cornelissen (2014, p. 5) has more recently defined CC as follows: "Corporate communication is a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent." As can be seen, the very definition of CC highlights communications' responsibility in reputation work.

According to Neill (2015), tasks commonly associated with CC include media relations, crisis communication, community relations, ghostwriting for senior executives, management of social media, reputation management, internal communications, and government relations. Cornelissen et al. (2006) define corporate communications as a managerial function, a conceptualization that is based upon a view of CC as a 'practice'. The scholars researching CC as practice have been interested in questions such as where the work is done and by who, what tools and techniques are used, what skills and roles

practitioners are required and how those skills are acquired, and the ways in which the work is organized (Cornelissen et al. 2006), which will be particular points of interest also in this study. With the recognition of corporate communications as a managerial function, communications is increasingly recognized in the academic literature as a strategic function that operates in the interface between an organization and its environment, gathering and interpreting information as well as sharing it from the organization to the external environment (Cornelissen et al. 2006).

The following section will define the research objectives as well as introduce the research questions for the present study.

1.2 Research objectives and research questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the role of the corporate communications function in building and maintaining favorable reputation in Finnish public business-to-business companies. The study examines communications and human resources (HR) professionals' perceptions on three main themes: (1) corporate reputation and its significance for companies, (2) reputation work related practices carried out by the CC function, and (3) reputation work on social media.

The objective of this study is to increase understanding of the multidimensional relationship between communications and reputation management in B2B companies, particularly in the complex environment where social media has changed stakeholder practices and behaviors. The focus is on B2B companies, since social media is changing their communication (Brennan & Croft 2012) and previous social media as well as reputation research has mostly concentrated on the business-to-consumer sector (Jussila et al. 2014). This study contributes to existing research by presenting practical examples of how CC contributes to reputation work, especially on social media, in companies with both stronger and weaker reputations.

The research problem of the study relates to the activities and through them the role of the communications function in corporate reputation building and management. The overall research question of this study is:

RQ: What is the role of the communications function in corporate reputation work in Finnish business-to-business companies?

The overall research question will be approached with three more precise sub-questions focusing on different themes. The sub-questions are the following:

SQ1: How do communications and human resources professionals perceive corporate reputation?

The first sub-question aims at revealing communications and HR professionals' perceptions on the concept of corporate reputation and its meaning and significance in their companies. This forms a foundation for studying the CC function's role in building and managing reputation.

SQ2: What are the communications function's tasks and responsibilities in reputation work?

The second research sub-question looks into the actual activities performed by the communications function. While the primary interest in this study is in the social media activities, the author feels examining also other activities will contribute to a more holistic understanding of the CC function's role in reputation work.

SQ3: How is social media used in the reputation work of business-to-business companies?

In this study, the focus is primarily on reputation work related social media activities, since online reputation management (see Jones et al. 2009, p. 934) is a relatively novel

concept increasing in importance and evolving continuously, making it an interesting and topical area of research.

The main research question of the study aims to connect the three sub-questions in order to provide an understanding of factors that contribute to the overall role of the corporate communications function in reputation work. The aim of the study is to provide an understanding of how corporate reputation is perceived and how the communications function contributes to reputation work in Finnish B2B companies.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The present Thesis is divided into six chapters: 1. Introduction, 2. Review of Literature, 3. Methodology, 4. Findings, 5. Discussion, and 6. Conclusions. This section has presented the background and objectives for the study. In the next chapter, existing literature on corporate reputation, the CC function's role in reputation work, and online reputation management are reviewed, and a theoretical framework for the present study is presented. The Methodology chapter will explain why qualitative research interviews were selected as the data gathering method for this study, how data collection was conducted, and how the data were analyzed. Following this, the fourth chapter introduces findings from the 11 research interviews with communications and human resources professionals. After that, the Discussion chapter will analyze the results of the present study and how they relate to prior research, and finally, the Conclusions chapter will summarize the research, introduce some practical implications, identify the limitations of the study, as well as provide suggestions for further research.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews literature that is relevant for the problem-setting of this Thesis. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section offers definitions for the concept of reputation and demonstrates how it is differentiated from related concepts such as brand and image. The second section focuses on corporate communication and specifically on the reputation work related activities carried out by the CC function. In addition, the section looks at a specific activity of the corporate communication function, social media communication, in relation to reputation work. Finally, the third section introduces the theoretical framework for this Thesis.

2.1 Concept of corporate reputation

This section introduces the concept of corporate reputation from several viewpoints. Corporate reputation is a complex concept and researchers have yet to agree on a uniform definition of the term (Gotsi & Wilson 2001; Barnett et al. 2006; Shamma 2012). The most cited definitions of corporate reputation include for example the following:

“A perceptual representation of a company’s past actions and future prospects that describe the firm’s overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals” (Fombrun 1996, p. 72).

“The reflection of an organization over time as seen through the eyes of its stakeholders” (Saxton 1998, p. 396).

“A stakeholder’s overall evaluation of a company over time” (Gotsi & Wilson 2001, p. 29).

In spite of the ambiguity in defining corporate reputation, most of the definitions, including the examples above, emphasize that reputation is related to a specific period in time, and is therefore subject to change. Reputation combines an organization’s past actions, current state, and future prospects (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 24; Dowling & Moran 2012). Also Gotsi and Wilson (2001) note that corporate reputation should not be considered as something unchangeable that can be managed only by logos and pre-

determined communication activities. Rather, reputation is dynamic and it is influenced by the stakeholders' images based on the firm's behavior, communication, as well as symbolism (Gotsi & Wilson 2001).

Moreover, in their papers covering previous research on corporate reputation, both Wartick (2002) and Walker (2010) concluded that the most used definitions for corporate reputation seem to emphasize three key factors: (1) reputation is founded on perceptions, (2) reputation is an aggregate perception of all stakeholders, and (3) reputation is comparative. When it comes to the first factor, reputation has indeed been recognized as not existing within the organization but in the interpretations of the people assessing it, i.e. the stakeholders (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 21). Therefore, reputation cannot be fully controlled by the organization (Brown et al. 2006). Second, reputation being regarded as an aggregate perception implies that it is considered as the perception of all the company's stakeholders, hence it is based on both internal and external stakeholders' perceptions (Walker 2010). Additionally, the notion that reputation is an aggregate perception distinguishes it from related concepts such as image and identity (Wartick 2002, see subsection 2.1.1). Third, it is recognized that reputation is comparative, and it can be either positive or negative (Wartick 2002; Brown et al. 2006; Walker 2010). Comparisons can be made naturally against competitors, but also against e.g. past performance or previous reputation of the company, or an industry average (Wartick 2002; Walker 2010).

However, while the above-mentioned definitions suggest that a company has one general reputation, which signifies a collective view of the organization, not all researchers share that idea. For example, Wartick (1992, p. 34) has previously defined reputation as a single stakeholder's perception, and hence, a construct that exists in the minds of individuals. A third school of thought thinks each stakeholder group shares a common evaluation of an organization, so a company has as many reputations as there are stakeholder groups (see e.g. Bromley 2002, p. 36).

In their book, Aula and Mantere (2008) introduce two views of reputation: reputation as capital and reputation as interpretation. The reputation as capital view considers reputation to be positively related to the competitive advantage of a firm. This view has

been adopted for example by Fombrun (1996) and Dowling (2001). These researchers regard reputation as an organization's intangible capital for which a value can be calculated. Good reputation can for example increase a company's market share, help attract and maintain best employees and investors, and help achieve positive publicity (Aula & Mantere 2008, pp. 44-49).

The "reputation as interpretation" scholars on the other hand think that the capital viewpoint does not address how reputation is formed and does not take into account the role of communication in that process (Aula & Mantere 2008, pp. 49-55). Reputation should be studied as interpretations among stakeholders, since the corporate reputation does not reside within the organization but among its stakeholders. The interpretations are often related to storytelling, which ties reputation closely to communication. An important aspect of organizational stories is that they must be based on actual operations. A successful corporate story is a credible, comprehensive, and realistic description of the organization. The reputation as interpretation view has been adopted by for example Smythe, Dorward and Reback (1992). (See Aula & Mantere 2008, pp. 49-55.)

Indeed, credibility and trust are central to acquiring strong corporate reputations. In principle a good reputation means that a company performs well in the eyes of its stakeholders (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 133). Also Dowling and Moran (2012) emphasize that strong reputations stem from acting responsibly. However, these actions should emerge from the strategy of the company, i.e. be built in the organization, and not from non-core tactics unrelated to strategy, i.e. be bolted on. The bolted-on model leads to a reputation that is less consistent with the main operations and true nature of the organization and hence less credible and easier for competitors to imitate, while reputation emerging from the built-in model becomes a more honest and reliable signal of the company's future behavior for stakeholders (Dowling & Moran 2012).

In addition to mere actions, several other factors affect stakeholders' perceptions. Dowling (2004) has presented reputations to form in the way illustrated in Figure 1 below. According to him, people tend to form their perception of a company based on what they know or have heard from others of the firm's character (e.g. organizational culture),

ability (e.g. the CEO and company resources), products and services, and behavior (e.g. leadership practices). Also, the general image of the whole industry the company is operating in has an effect on the reputation. The middle section of the figure signals the impact of the stakeholders' values in forming the overall reputation. When the image of the company (the left side of the figure) fits with the values of the person assessing it, the company is awarded a good reputation, which enhances trust and confidence in the organization. (See Dowling 2004.)

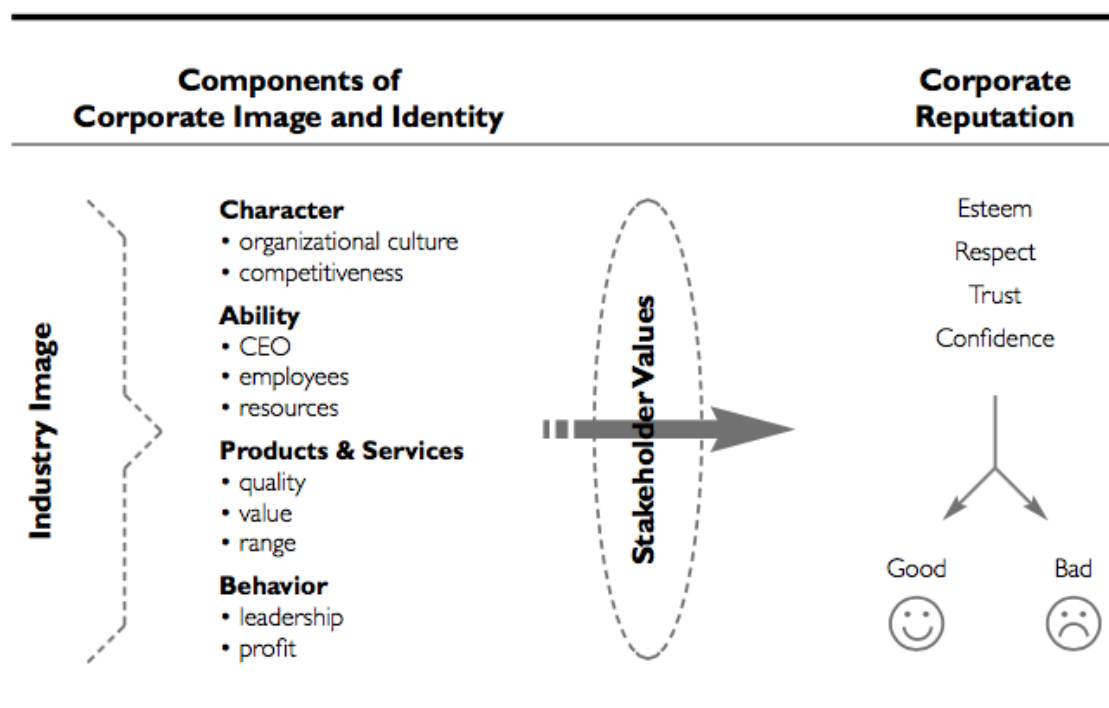


Figure 1. The formation of corporate reputation (Dowling 2004, p. 21)

As can be noticed from Figure 1, corporate identity and image affect the formation of reputation, although they are sometimes confused to mean the same thing. The next subsection differentiates these terms.

2.1.1 Reputation, image, identity, or brand?

The terms ‘corporate reputation’, ‘corporate brand’, ‘corporate image’, and ‘corporate identity’ are often used interchangeably when talking about organizations, at least in

spoken language. In academia however, the four are considered as separate concepts, which will be explained and differentiated in this chapter.

The word 'brand' is typically used to refer to the whole company, when in fact brands are created by the organization for its products (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 29). Brands are also more easily controlled by the organization than reputation (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 29). Knox and Bickerton (2003) define corporate branding as "the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of an organization's unique business model" (p. 998). Brand is more closely related to a company's products and services; it is regarded as a symbol that distinguishes the company's offering (Knox & Bickerton 2003). Dowling and Moran (2012) are in step with Knox and Bickerton, arguing that the brand signals what the company will do, what makes them important and what differentiates them from others. Also Argenti and Druckemiller (2004) differentiate reputation, image, and brand. According to these researchers, corporate brand "conveys expectations of what the company will deliver in terms of products, services, and customer experience" (p. 369). According to Fombrun and van Riel (2004, p. 4), brand and reputation are distinct in that branding affects the probability of a purchase decision by a consumer, while reputation affects the probability of supportive behavior from all of the company's stakeholders.

Corporate or organizational identity is often regarded as answering the question "Who are we?" (Dowling & Moran 2012). In their seminal research, Albert and Whetten (1985) define organizational identity to consist of central, enduring, and distinctive (CED) features of an organization. Central refers to features that are considered essential about the organization by its members, while enduring points to lasting features, highlighting the definition's stability (Albert & Whetten 1985; Whetten 2006). Finally, the features need to be distinctive, distinguishing the organization and its identity from others (Albert & Whetten 1985; Whetten 2006). Identity is also said to refer to internal stakeholders', i.e. organizational members', perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about the organization (Hatch & Schultz 1997; Shamma 2012). More specifically, Hatch and Schultz (1997) define corporate identity as "a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics" (p. 357). Barnett et al.'s (2006) view differs to some extent from the previous, as they define identity as the "core" or the "basic

character of the firm”. According to Walker (2010), two concepts can be separated from the definition of corporate identity: the *desired identity* refers to what the company wants its internal stakeholders to think about it, and the *actual identity* refers to what the organizational members actually think about the company.

Corporate image on the other hand can be regarded as “a reflection of an organization’s identity and its corporate brand”, and a company can have several images depending on which stakeholder group’s point of view is in question (Argenti & Druckenmiller 2004, p. 369). Brown et al. (2006) make a distinction between the *intended image* and the *construed image* (also referred to as the desired image and the actual image, see Walker 2010). With the intended image, the authors refer to the set of associations of the company that the managers would want a particular stakeholder group to hold. A company can promote a different intended image to differ stakeholder groups (e.g. consumers, suppliers, and investors) (Brown et al. 2006). In addition to the intended image there is the construed image, which Brown et al. (2006) define as the associations that organizational members have about external stakeholders’ perceptions about the company – i.e. what the organization believes others think about it. Based on the definitions at least the intended image can be affected by the company, which implies that images are less dynamic than reputation, and images are easier to manage and control (Aula and Mantere 2008, pp. 27-28).

And finally, corporate reputation is regarded as a comprehensive concept that comprises all the others: identity, image (Chun 2005), and brand (Shamma 2012). Corporate reputation is the answer to the question: “What do stakeholders actually think of the organization?” (Brown et al. 2006). Hence, it is the collective representation of all stakeholders’ images of a company, based on how stakeholders have perceived the company’s performance and behavior (Gotsi & Wilson 2001; Argenti & Druckenmiller 2004). Corporate associations, i.e. reputation, belong to the stakeholders, not the organization (Brown et al. 2006), and therefore the reputation can be either positive or negative (Walker 2010). What differentiates reputation from image is time – reputation develops slowly and is somewhat more stable, whereas images form more quickly and change more frequently (Walker 2010) – and that reputation includes both internal and

external stakeholders' perceptions, while image is defined as only the outsiders' perception (Chun 2005). Moreover, reputation is hard to control and manage, since a variety of outside factors, such as reputations of competitors, affect an organization's reputation (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 121). Figure 2 demonstrates the relationships between the concepts presented in this subsection (adopted from Kitchen et al. 2013, p. 268).

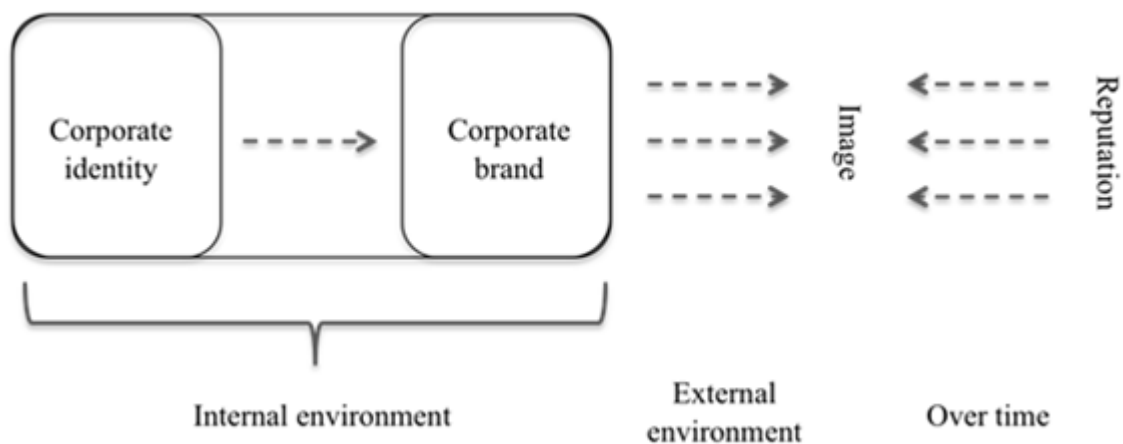


Figure 2. Identity, brand, image, and reputation (adopted from Kitchen et al. 2013, p. 268)

In order to be considered as significant for companies, reputation naturally has to carry benefits for business. Previous research has identified several benefits of strong reputation, which will be introduced in the next subsection.

2.1.2 Benefits of good corporate reputation

It is widely accepted that superior reputation has a positive influence on different aspects in business (Sarstedt et al. 2013; Goldring 2015). Several researchers support the idea that corporate reputation is turning into a strategic asset for companies (Fombrun & Van Riel 1997; Forman & Argenti 2005; Melewar 2008), as a large amount of research has been conducted on the positive effects of strong corporate reputation.

Corporate reputation has been regarded as an intangible asset (see e.g. Roberts & Dowling 2002; Raithel & Schwaiger 2015), which gives the company a competitive advantage, as

it is according to Abratt & Kleyn (2012, p. 1049) associated with the following four attributes: (1) corporate reputation is valuable for the company, (2) strong reputation is rare, (3) reputation cannot be imitated, and (4) reputation cannot be equivalently substituted. First, good reputation has value for the company, since it enables exploiting opportunities and neutralizing threats – research has found that companies with strong reputations are more likely to survive crisis with less damage (Abratt & Kleyn 2012). Second and third, good reputation takes time to build and consists of a unique set of assets, and hence it is hard to achieve, which makes it rare (Abratt & Kleyn 2012). Moreover, the intangible character of reputation makes it difficult for competing companies to replicate (Roberts & Dowling 2002). And fourth, there are no strategically equivalent substitutes for reputation (Abratt & Kleyn 2012).

Moreover, researchers have shown that reputation is linked to higher financial performance, such as increased stock price and lower cost of capital (Saxton 1998; Roberts & Dowling 2002). However, research suggests that the link between reputation and performance can go both directions – a company's reputation affects its financial performance, and the performance affects its reputation (McGuire et al. 1990).

In addition to the financial aspect, a strong reputation is argued to have a positive influence on non-financial business dimensions. As Figure 1 in section 2.1 already illustrated, a good reputation enhances trust and confidence in the company. This is extremely important as it makes the stakeholders feel safe to interact with the company – may it be buying its products or services, purchasing its stock, or applying for a job in the organization (Dowling 2004). Because reputation is valued, companies with strong reputations are likely to e.g. lure best customers and most qualified employees (Roberts & Dowling 2002; Dowling 2004; Chun 2005), and to achieve higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty towards their products and brands (Forman & Argenti 2005; Carreras et al. 2013).

However, even if the above-mentioned benefits have been recognized, there exists differing views among researchers as to how to measure reputation – what actually is

good and what is bad reputation. Therefore, the following subsection introduces aspects and critique related to reliably evaluating and measuring corporate reputation.

2.1.3 Measurement of reputation

Measuring the ambiguous concept of reputation reliably and comprehensively has caused differences of opinion among researcher and practitioners (Chun 2005; Walker 2010). Many quantitative and qualitative instruments have been developed to measure reputation, but they often tend to simplify too much, making it difficult to compare companies' reputations or different stakeholders' views of a company's reputation with each other (Chun 2005).

Chun (2005) has identified three schools of thought most often applied in relation to measuring reputation: evaluative, impressional, and relational. The evaluative school assesses reputation from the financial performance perspective and from the point of view of a single stakeholder group, mainly the CEO, shareholders, or investors. The impressional school is not so interested in financial performance, but evaluates reputation in terms of identity, image, and personality, i.e. the overall impression of a company, usually as employees' or customers' view. Finally, the relational school adopts the viewpoint of multiple stakeholder groups, as suggested in many definitions of corporate reputation (see e.g. Fombrun 1996, p. 72). It acknowledges differences between different stakeholders' assessments of a company's reputation, but also considers that the internal and external views are linked. (See Chun 2005.)

Two measures – the Fortune's Most Admired Companies (FMAC) and the Reputation Institute's RepTrak® (formerly the Reputation Quotient) – are probably the most often used and discussed measures of reputation (Wartick 2002). Both surveys are based on a set of indicators, which constitute a score of a company's reputation perceived by respondents (Helm 2005). The annual FMAC study is conducted among executives, directors, and analysts, and it rates companies based on nine key attributes of reputation: quality of products and services, innovation, long-term investment value, use of corporate assets, people management, financial soundness, social responsibility, quality of

management, and global competitiveness (Fortune 2012; Stein 2003). Reputation Institute on the other hand launched their first measurement instrument, the Reputation Quotient (RQ), in 1998. Today, Reputation Institute uses the RepTrak® system, which was created in 2005-2006. The system examines 15 stakeholder groups' perceptions about companies' abilities to deliver in 23 attributes in seven key dimensions, which are: products and services, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship, leadership, and performance. (Reputation Institute 2016.)

In Finland, the most well-known measure of reputation is the annual Reputation Study on companies listed on OMX Helsinki, conducted by a Finnish monthly business magazine *Arvopaperi*, and a communications agency Pohjoisranta Burson-Marsteller. The study has been conducted since 2001 among small-scale investors, who evaluate companies based on 27 statements related to six dimensions: corporate culture and leadership, success, public image, products and services, social responsibility, and readiness for change (Hämäläinen 2012; Laitila 2015).

Based on their review of earlier research, Berens and van Riel (2004) propose that there are three main conceptual streams to identify corporate associations. The first and also the most frequently used one is *social expectations*, which refers to the expectations that people have of companies' behavior. The things people expect from companies naturally vary over time, but e.g. the quality of products or services, quality of leadership, being a good employer and doing something good for society have remained the same through decades. The social expectations approach is used when the aim is to study the stakeholders' perceptions on the behaviors of companies in a benchmark context, and e.g. the above-mentioned FMAC and RepTrak® surveys are based on this approach. (Berens & van Riel 2004.) The second main concept is *corporate personality*, where organizations' behavior is evaluated by using corporate personality traits, such as open, innovative, reliable, selfish, or exclusive (see Davies et al. 2003). The personality approach is often applied when the researchers' interest is in comparing the perceptions of one specific company's key stakeholder groups (Berens & van Riel 2004), e.g. by using the Corporate Personality Scale developed by Davies et al. (2003). The third and final main conceptual stream related to predicting companies' behavior is *trust* (Berens & van

Riel 2004). Previous literature suggests that there are three traits underlying the concept of trust: (1) reliability, which is perceived as the ability of a company to keep its promises; (2) honesty, i.e. the intension of a company to fulfill its promises and be sincere, and (3) benevolence, that is to say the willingness of a company to behave in a cooperative manner. The trust approach is adopted to examine especially conditions with high-risk interactions, like B2B situations. (See Berens & van Riel 2004.)

Yet, what many researchers seem to struggle with is tying the measurement of the construct to its definition. This is emphasized by Walker (2010), who discusses five things that should be considered when aiming to measure corporate reputation:

1. Since reputation by definition is understood as stakeholders' perceptions, objective measures of reputation, such as market share, are not consistent with the nature of the concept.
2. Reputation is an aggregate perception, but in practice, it is nearly impossible to measure the perceptions of all stakeholders. Individual stakeholder groups' perceptions of a company's reputation are likely to differ, due to which an aggregate measure would sacrifice information per stakeholder group (see also Wartick 2002). In addition, reputation is issue specific, and there can exist only one reputation per issue (e.g. financial performance, employability). It should therefore be specified which stakeholder group(s) and issue(s) are analyzed.
3. Corporate reputation is comparative – it can be compared to competing companies, but also e.g. to prior reputation or the industry average.
4. As reputation can be positive or negative, the studies should incorporate both positively and negatively reputed companies instead of examining only positive reputations.
5. Reputation has been regarded as relatively stable and enduring, which is why cross-sectional research has been thought to provide greater value for the measurement of reputation than longitudinal research, even though the latter is generally accepted as more valuable (Walker 2010). Today, this last point is, however, debatable, as for example social media has exposed reputation to new risks and quicker changes (see e.g. Aula 2010; Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Overall, reputation listings have been criticized for measuring mainly financial performance and having a biased sample of respondents often consisting mainly of senior executives (Wartick 2002; Chun 2005; Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 37). Indeed, as Walker (2010) points out, since most of the surveys (including the FMAC) measures the perceptions of a small group of stakeholders (like executives, directors, or financial analysts), they could actually not be seen as measurements of reputation. Another cause of critique has been using unidimensional measures, since rating companies simply good or bad does not explain why one company has a better or poorer reputation than another (Chun 2005). Additionally, most measures do not take e.g. cultural factors into account (i.e. what do attributes such as ‘good quality’ or ‘responsibility’ mean in different cultures) (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 38).

This section has introduced definitions for reputation, most of which characterize it as stakeholders’ aggregate perception of a company over time. Reputation – which differs from the related concepts of ‘corporate brand’, ‘corporate image’, and ‘corporate identity’ – is argued to have several financial and non-financial benefits for businesses. However, measuring reputation reliably has proved challenging among researcher and practitioners.

As the definition for reputation suggests, a company cannot determine its reputation, since it is formed on stakeholders’ perceptions. Still, a company can and it should try to influence stakeholders’ perceptions by communicating with them in various ways and channels. This idea will be covered in the following section, which focuses on managing reputation within communication.

2.2 Managing reputation within communication

This second section introduces earlier literature on the communicational activities related to reputation building and management, and focuses specifically on online reputation management. Moreover, three online reputation management practices are presented in more detail: stakeholder engagement, employer branding, and employee ambassadorship.

As the previous section suggested, a good reputation in principle stems from the responsible actions of a company. In reality this is of course not enough, and the good deeds have to be communicated to stakeholders (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 133). Gray and Balmer (1998) also argue that corporate reputations commonly develop over time as a result of continuous performance, but add that it should be strengthened by competent communication. Thus, it is essential to consider the role of communications to better understand the development of strong reputations, as this function is closely linked to corporate reputation (Burke 1998; Fombrun & Rindova 1998; Forman & Argenti 2005). Many scholars even suggest that a key responsibility of the corporate communications (CC) function is to build and maintain favorable reputations with the company's stakeholder groups (see e.g. Forman & Argenti 2005; Cornelissen 2014, p. 5).

Indeed, many of the tasks and responsibilities commonly associated with communications relate to fostering positive reputation. According to Neill (2015), CC's responsibilities include media relations, crisis communication, community relations, ghostwriting for senior executives, management of social media, reputation management, internal communications, and government relations. As per Argenti's definition (1996), functions within the discipline of corporate communication include image and identity, corporate advertising, media relations, financial communications, employee relations, community relations and corporate philanthropy, government relations, and crisis communications. Cornelissen et al.'s (2006) view of corporate communication activities is consistent with Argenti's. According to them the activities include media relations, government relations, employee communications, community relations, advertising, investor relations, corporate design and issues management.

By definition, reputation cannot be controlled, since it is formed among stakeholders, today more and more in the uncontrollable digital environment. However, companies can try to influence the perceptions of their stakeholders by being competent, acting responsibly, and communicating effectively – i.e. living up to stakeholders' expectations (Aula & Mantere 2008; Juholin 2009, p. 193; Floreddu et al. 2014). In acquiring strong corporate reputations, credibility and trust are central. Indeed, e.g. Fombrun and van Riel (2004, pp. 87-94) suggest that there are five principles that help to create a strong,

positive, and sustainable reputation: being visible, authentic, transparent, distinctive, and consistent.

Romenti and Illia (2013, p. 184) introduce communicatively constituted reputation. It builds on the idea that in an organization, all actions are coordinated, relationships are created, and organizations overall are maintained by the means of communication (see e.g. Christensen & Cornelissen 2011). Communicatively constituted reputation emerges from four factors. The first one is managing corporate identity carefully (self-structuring), as it influences stakeholders' perceptions of the company and hence its reputation (Romenti and Illia 2013, p. 187; see also Dowling 2004). The second one is negotiating membership within the organization so that employees feel satisfied and act as ambassadors of (positive) reputation (Romenti & Illia 2013, pp. 187-188). This can be done e.g. through effective internal communication. The third factor is activity coordination, with which continuous alignment among corporate values and daily collective behaviors is assured (Romenti & Illia 2013, p. 188). Fourth, institutional positioning encompasses stakeholder engagement and community building, which legitimate an organization as a social partner (Romenti & Illia 2013, pp. 189-190).

Dowling (2006) has outlined three important roles that CC plays in driving good corporate reputation: external communication, internal communication, and issues management. First, with external communication, the objective is to raise awareness and generate appreciation towards the company among stakeholders (Dowling 2006). External communication also serves as a means for relationship building. As reputations are based on the perceptions of stakeholders – like customers, the media, employees and investors – establishing good relationships with key stakeholders is considered vital in maintaining a favorable reputation (see e.g. Forman & Argenti 2005; Murray & White 2005; Malmelin 2007). These relationships are formed in every encounter between the organization and its stakeholders, whether they be physical encounters, advertising, press releases, interviews, customer service phone calls or Twitter conversations. It is important for companies to recognize all possible points of interaction, as satisfied and committed stakeholders are more likely to ascribe the company a better reputation (Forman & Argenti 2005; Murray & White 2005; Malmelin 2007).

Second, employees' role in influencing corporate reputation has been recognized as significant, which highlights the need for effective internal communication. Companies need to try to achieve also good internal reputation and ensure employees are satisfied (Olmedo-Cifuentes et al. 2014). Employees need to feel they can trust the company, they want to be informed about what is happening in the company, and they want to contribute to the decision-making (Dortok 2006). Internal communication helps to establish good reputations by engaging employees through e.g. clarifying the company's mission and the employees' role in it (Dowling 2006). Indeed, when studying the interaction between internal communication and corporate reputation, Dortok (2006) found that companies with higher reputations regarded internal communication as more important and put more effort into it than did companies with lower reputations.

Finally, issues management refers to having to occasionally explain or defend the company's actions (Dowling 2006). Also Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) highlight the importance of issues management for reputation. According to them, communications can manage corporate reputation by identifying the right issues and the right arenas in which the issues are discussed, and interacting effectively with other actors in these arenas. Changes in the media landscape and the emergence of social media have led to organizations losing power over conversations concerning them. Instead, stakeholders and organizations have equal possibilities to get their voices heard in the arenas. The issue arena theory underlines the shift in focus from organizations to issues (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010). Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) suggest that the role of CC is widening beyond relationship management to issue arena monitoring.

Indeed, social media has changed companies' reputation management. Therefore, the following subsections cover reputation management in the online environment and introduce in more detail the practices of stakeholder engagement, employer branding, and employee ambassadorship.

2.2.1 Definitions for online reputation management

In the past, companies often took a more passive, reactive approach to managing their corporate reputation. Reputation was not actively managed in the long term, and companies simply tried to solve crises as quickly as possible when they emerged in order to minimize the negative effects to the organization's reputation, and after the solution they went back to normal business (Shamma 2012). In today's social media environment this type of reactive approach is not enough, and companies need to actively manage their corporate reputation. According to Aula (2010), social media poses a threat to reputation, since users can easily generate and share unverified information about an organization on different social media platforms. Reputation risk can result from a company's own communication activities as well, since it has to think about e.g. how it reacts to claims presented on social media (Aula 2010). The online environment has caused corporate reputation to be "easily enhanced or permanently damaged" (Jones et al. 2009). Yet, even though the possibilities and threats of social media for corporate reputation have been recognized, little research exists on the relationship between social media communication and reputation (Floreddu et al. 2014). However, some previous literature on online reputation management strategies will be presented in this subsection.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) have famously defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Web 2.0 refers to a new way of utilizing the World Wide Web where content is continuously modified by all users in a collaborative way, compared to content previously being created by individuals. As for user generated content, the term refers to all the ways in which people make use of social media, and it has to meet three requirements: the content has to be published on a publicly accessible website or social networking site accessible to a selected group of people, it has to demonstrate some creative effort, and it has to be created outside of professional practices (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) also classify social media applications under six categories. These include social networking sites (SNSs, e.g. Facebook and Twitter), blogs,

collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), content communities (e.g. YouTube), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life), and virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft). Previous research has shown that the CC function is most often the department primarily responsible for strategic and practical social media communication, followed by the marketing function in fewer companies (Verhoeven et al. 2012; Neill & Moody 2015).

Before social media, the main purpose of stakeholder communications seemed to be to communicate and transfer messages, which were determined by the organization itself, unchanged from the organization to stakeholders (Aula & Mantere 2008, p. 168). Social media has, however, changed the nature of communication. In the traditional communication model by Lasswell (1948), the source (in this context the company) encodes the message, which is transmitted through a medium to the receiver (stakeholder) who then decodes the message. Often the process includes also noise, which can in the business context be understood as other companies' competing messages and offerings (Duncan & Moriarty 1998). Today, communication goes two ways between the company and its stakeholders. The company sends a message through social media channels to the desired stakeholder group(s), but in addition to decoding the message the receiver chooses whether to respond (Swani et al. 2014). If the stakeholder decides to respond, the company in turn decodes the message and possibly replies, which creates a conversation between the parties (Swani et al. 2014). Moreover, in social media, the messages may also originate from the stakeholders. Figure 3 below (adopted from Swani et al. 2014) illustrates the social media communication model.

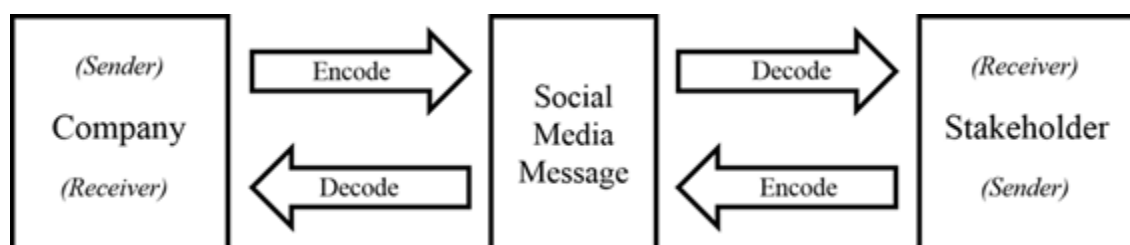


Figure 3. Social media communication model (adopted from Swani et al. 2014)

Naturally, the expansion of digital communication in the past ten years has had a dramatic impact also on the CC function and its capabilities to fulfil its central responsibility in

reputation management (Cornelissen 2014; Dijkmans et al. 2015). While consumers and other stakeholders used to simply read or watch content produced by organizations, in today's social media environment individuals are to a large extent the ones creating, sharing, modifying, and discussing the content, and not companies' communications and marketing departments (Jones et al. 2009; Kietzmann et al. 2011). The digital environment has increased exceptionally the speed, reach, and interactivity of communication (Jones et al. 2009). Indeed, the interactivity and the inability of companies to manage the content have made it nearly impossible for companies to control the conversations had about themselves on social media channels (Aula 2010). Still, the popularity of social media has made it a platform that companies cannot ignore.

Consequently, organizational reputations are increasingly shaped by the content that stakeholders encounter specifically on social media (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Social media has become an essential communications channel for practically all organizations, since it offers an efficient and low cost way for companies to be involved in timely and direct contact with their stakeholders (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The digital era has not, however, come without challenges. Aula (2010) argues that social media has changed traditional reputation communication in three ways. First, the interactive nature of social media enables also users to easily communicate with one another and disseminate messages about companies (Aula 2010; Floreddu et al. 2014). Second, strategic reputation management on social media should focus on acting ethically and not on trying to achieve short-term business goals (Aula 2010). Third, in social media, subjective truths easily turn into collective truths about what a company is, and companies have to be prepared to react to possible incorrect interpretations (Aula 2010).

Bunting and Lipski (2001) were among the first to recognize the importance of online reputation management. According to them, effective online reputation management consists of four features:

1. *Engaging opposition*. This means that while a company should respond to criticism, it should also accept people's right to possess and express their alternative points of view online.

2. *Direct communication.* A company should communicate with its stakeholders on their territory, like different online forums.
3. *Third-party endorsement.* In the online environment, getting third-party confirmation from well-respected sources is important especially in crisis situations, but also otherwise.
4. *Building relationships.* In order to succeed in online reputation management, a company should proactively build relationships with its stakeholders in different online communities, and cooperate with them in the aim of achieving mutual benefit. (See Bunting & Lipski 2001.)

Jones et al. (2009, p. 934) define online reputation management as “the process of positioning, monitoring, measuring, talking and listening as the organization engages in a transparent and ethical dialogue with its various on-line stakeholders”. For McCorkindale and DiStaso (2013, p. 508), online reputation management signifies that companies use social media channels to build trust in them among stakeholders by communicating transparently, consistently, and engagingly. Figure 4 below illustrates Jones et al.’s (2009, p. 929) idea of the online reputation management process.

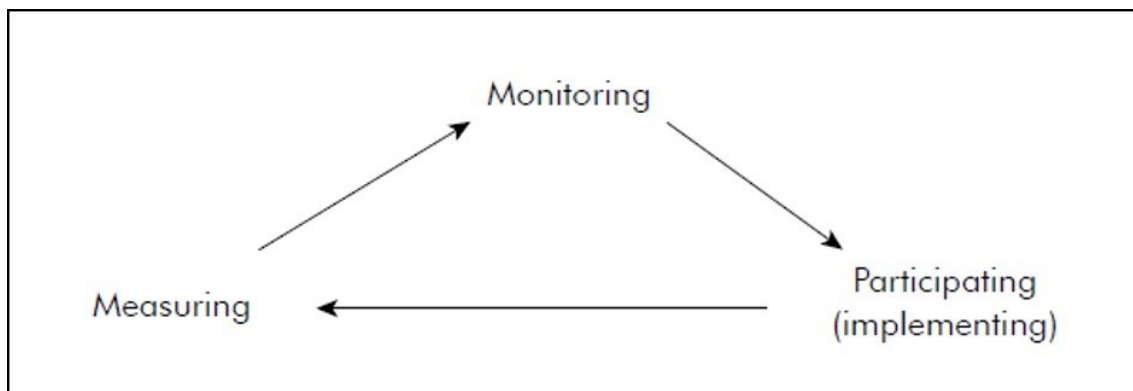


Figure 4. Online reputation management process (Lima, Jones and Temperley 2009, in Jones et al. 2009)

As the above definition and figure suggest, Jones et al. (2009) advice companies to do three things: (1) to actively monitor the social media environment to find out what stakeholders are saying about the company, (2) to participate in social media by posting

relevant content, engaging stakeholders and being in dialogue with them, and (3) to measure the impact of social media on reputation. McCorkindale and DiStaso (2013, p. 503) also argue for the importance of monitoring and measuring in building and maintaining good reputation. They highlight that in measuring, the metrics should move beyond numbers to include the nature of conversations and relationship building. Dijkmans et al. (2015) agree by stating that online reputation management encompasses e.g. interacting with stakeholders online, creating shareable content, monitoring what stakeholders are saying, and addressing possible negative content, in the aim of achieving enhanced trustworthiness and stakeholder commitment as well as positive attitude towards the company.

Moreover, McCorkindale and DiStaso (2013, pp. 500-503) outline three factors that influence the formation of corporate reputation on social media: trust, transparency, and engagement. First, trusting that a company acts ethically is crucial in reputation. In order to build a strong reputation, a company and its stakeholders must trust each other. Today, stakeholders trust other stakeholders more than companies, which highlights the importance of enhancing trust. Second, to gain a good reputation, a company has to be transparent in its communication. Social media has facilitated transparency, but companies must also carefully consider the extent of their transparency. Third, corporate reputation in social media is created through two-way information sharing and engagement between companies and their stakeholders. (McCorkindale and DiStaso 2013, pp. 500-503.) Stakeholder engagement is discussed in more detail in subsection 2.2.3.

Aula (2010) defines four strategies for reputation management in the social media environment. In the *strategy of absence*, the company does not proactively attend conversations had about itself, and information flows mainly one-way from the organization to its stakeholders. In the second strategy, *the strategy of presence*, the company is aware that conversations are had about it in social media, but reputation management is still based on traditional public relations where the company aims simply to inform specific stakeholders via certain predetermined channels. In the third strategy, *the strategy of attendance*, the organization attends the conversations on social media as

a listener, and observes, collects and shares internally any important information concerning the company. Finally, in the fourth strategy, the *strategy of omnipresence*, the company engages in diverse and continuous interaction with its stakeholders on social media platforms. (Aula 2010.) Since the nature of social media enables reputation risks to emerge anywhere at any time, Aula (2010) suggests companies to adopt the strategy of omnipresence.

In their article, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) present general pieces of advice for companies' social media use, which also apply for online reputation management purposes:

- Choose the channels carefully. Every application attracts a certain group of people, and since activity is key on social media, a company cannot be present in all channels.
- Align the messages across different social media channels. Contradicting messages will surely confuse the followers.
- Integrate social media communication and traditional media communication, since in the stakeholders' eyes all communication is part of the same thing: a company's reputation.
- Decide who is in charge of the company's social media communication – is it some specific person/people, or are all employees equally responsible for it.
- Be active on social media and engage in conversations with stakeholders. In order to be interesting and provide meaningful content on social media, the company should remember to listen to its stakeholders.
- Be honest. Most importantly, social media communication has to be honest – inventing e.g. fictional profiles to promote products or services will be noticed. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010.)

This subsection has presented definitions for online reputation management. As the interest in this study is in B2B companies, the following subsection introduces characteristics of social media communication particularly in the B2B sector.

2.2.2 Social media communication in the B2B context

Although social media is today a part of nearly every organization's external communication, it poses different possibilities and best practices for business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) companies (Jussila et al. 2014). Business-to-business companies have been slower to adopt social media than business-to-consumer companies, and research on corporate social media utilization has focused largely on the B2C sector (Michaelidou et al. 2011; Jussila et al. 2014). This Thesis studies reputation work specifically in B2B companies, and recent studies on the utilization of social media in the B2B context are presented next.

As for example Jussila et al. (2014) point out, significant differences exist regarding e.g. products and markets between the B2B and B2C sectors, and this affects their external communication. In the B2B sector, products (or services) are generally more complex and their development takes more time. In the B2B market, companies usually have fewer customers, and the customers are actually other organizations instead of private persons as in the consumer market. Moreover, B2B companies co-operate with their customers in a more direct and intense manner (Jussila et al. 2014). Establishing long-term relationships between buyers and sellers is essential in B2B interactions, as it helps to moderate the higher risks of the purchases (Swani et al. 2014). Indeed, a common characteristic of social media use in the B2B sector is that social media are considered more as means for relationship building and brand development than as a hard-sell vehicle (Michaelidou et al. 2011; Brennan & Croft 2012; Swani et al. 2014).

Jussila et al. (2014) recently studied social media adoption in the Finnish B2B sector and found that only 29.6% of the studied 125 companies used social media in their external and/or internal communication. Moreover, social media was more popular in internal than in external use, as it had been adopted internally in 28.8% of the companies, and externally in only 12.8% of the companies (Jussila et al. 2014). B2B companies have been reluctant to adopt social media, mainly because perceiving it to lack relevance in their industries (Michaelidou et al. 2011). Other perceived barriers observed in earlier research include lack of resources, time, and training, as well as unfamiliarity with the new

technology (Buehrer et al. 2005), and difficulties in measuring or assessing the benefits of social media for business (Rapp et al. 2013; Jussila et al. 2014). However, those B2Bs that do use social media report it to have several advantages. In their study among small and medium-sized B2B companies in the UK, Michaelidou et al. (2011) found that the three most important goals for companies in using social media were attracting new customers, fostering customer relationships, and building awareness. Additionally, increasing loyalty and enhancing reputation have been found to motivate B2B companies' social media activity (Rapp et al. 2013).

Among the Finnish B2B companies, the most commonly used social media platforms for external communication have been social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook and LinkedIn (Jussila et al. 2014). Other studies, too, support the popularity of SNSs (see Brennan & Croft 2012; Verhoeven et al. 2012), and add that blogs are also among the channels most often used by B2Bs (Brennan & Croft 2012). Moreover, LinkedIn, blogs, and Slideshare – a place where organizations and individuals can share slide shows of e.g. press conference presentations – appeared in Brennan and Croft's (2012) study as social media channels used more widely among B2B than B2C companies. Multiple Facebook pages and Twitter accounts were also found to be used for companies' different brands or markets (Brennan & Croft 2012).

In Facebook and Twitter, the activities of B2Bs seem to resemble those of B2C companies' accounts, including encouraging postings on the Facebook wall, sharing news, pictures, videos, and even competitions, as well as events organized by the company (Brennan & Croft 2012). Swani et al. (2014) studied corporate Twitter use and found that B2B companies' tweets included both functional appeals (e.g. product features and other tangible cues) to clarify the complex offering, and emotional appeals (i.e. content to evoke emotions motivating the purchase) to strengthen relationships and increase customer engagement. The companies actively utilizing the social media channels also cross-reference their posts on e.g. Facebook and Twitter in order to ensure a wide visibility (Brennan & Croft 2012). In addition, to be authentic, companies' social media communication should balance the social nature of the channels and the organization's own style (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen 2014; Ott & Theunissen 2015).

Too officially worded and fact-based messages might not be well received online, especially in crisis situations, since they can be perceived as “talking down” (Ott & Theunissen 2015).

As explained above, B2B companies’ objectives for social media use often include creating awareness as well as building trust and relationships with stakeholders (Michaelidou et al. 2011). Therefore, the following three subsections introduce earlier literature on online reputation management practices related to those objectives, i.e. on stakeholder engagement, employer branding, and employee ambassadorship.

2.2.3 Online stakeholder engagement

Social media has demanded companies to change their communication, since stakeholders no longer want to be simply talked at, but instead they want to engage and have companies to listen and respond (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Aula and Mantere (2008) even argue that communication should be considered not just one-way or two-way, but creating meaning and sharing experiences jointly through verbal and nonverbal transactions. Hence, communication is not just transmission of messages, but more the maintenance of a community in time (Aula & Mantere 2008, pp. 16-17).

Indeed, research on online reputation management highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders and establishing relationships with them to build and maintain favorable reputation (van Doorn et al. 2010; Dijkmans et al. 2015). Social media enables engaging stakeholders in the company’s activities by facilitating relationship building, cooperation and dialogue between the organization and its stakeholders (Dijkmans et al. 2015). In their study on the airline business, Dijkmans et al. (2015) found that stakeholders’ engagement in companies’ social media activities was positively related to corporate reputation. Relying solely on marketing communications is not enough anymore, and companies should participate more in their customers’ and other stakeholders’ social media activities, in order to facilitate interaction with them and to understand the impact of the activities on the company’s brand image and reputation (Heinonen 2011). Involving e.g. customers in the company’s activities is important, since engaged

customers can help companies in activities like gathering ideas for developing new products or modifying some existing ones. Moreover, engaged stakeholders are more likely to create and disseminate information about the company, which in turn contributes to the long-term reputation of the firm. (van Doorn et al. 2010.) In times of crises, engaged stakeholders can also defend and support the company more authentically than official corporate statements (Romenti & Illia 2013, p. 190; Ott & Theunissen 2015).

Van Doorn et al. (2010, p. 253) define customer engagement behavior (CEB) as “the customers’ behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”. Dijkmans et al. (2015) on the other hand state that engagement is commonly understood as consisting of cognitive aspects (being interested in a company’s activities), behavioral aspects (participating in a company’s activities), and emotional aspects (feeling positive or negative about a company’s activities). In the social media environment, these refer to stakeholders’ familiarity with companies’ social media activities (cognition), the extent to which they follow these activities (behavior), and ultimately their participation, interaction, and feelings towards the company and its activities (emotion) (Dijkmans et al. 2015). Van Doorn et al. (2010) further argue that CEBs should be proactively managed in three steps:

1. identifying the actors, the forms of CEB, and the channels in which they occur,
2. evaluating both short- and long-term consequences of CEBs, and
3. reacting to CEBs by developing capabilities and resources to manage them, e.g. creating platforms for engaged stakeholders to express their ideas and listening to feedback (van Doorn et al. 2010).

The key thing in getting stakeholders to engage in the company’s activities on social media is relevant and interesting content (Verhoeven et al. 2012; Pereira et al. 2014). According to Pereira et al.’s (2014) study, users share companies’ Facebook content on their own accounts most often when they can somehow relate to the content or are somehow involved with the brand. Findings from the same study indicate that the types of content usually shared were promotions and contests, and information about brand events.

In addition to producing compelling content, other actions can help to engage stakeholders. Based on her research on consumers' motivations for participating in social media, Heinonen (2011) suggests multiple activities companies can initiate in order to facilitate stakeholder engagement on social media channels. According to her, to achieve interaction, the company must first create awareness and interest towards itself. This can be done e.g. by initiating discussions around current topics or encouraging stakeholders to share their own experiences on certain topics or posing questions. Further engagement can be achieved through inviting employees or even customers to share their experiences and stories on the company's social media channels and inviting other users to respond to them. One beneficial, although challenging, strategy is to engage stakeholders in production activities, e.g. through a contest. Successfully executed, this strategy could result in new insights for the offering and operations of the company and reduce research and development related costs. (Heinonen 2011.)

In addition to engagement practices, earlier research on online reputation management suggests that stakeholders base their evaluation of a company also on its employer brand. Therefore, the following subsection introduces earlier literature on creating and promoting a desirable employer brand as part of overall reputation management.

2.2.4 Employer branding as part of reputation management

Employer brand is closely related to overall corporate reputation, since researchers argue that developing a good employer brand facilitates achieving also a strong, positive reputation (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Alniacik et al. 2012). In today's environment where work is getting increasingly knowledge intense, companies are competing for the most qualified employees, who use corporate reputation as a source of information about the organizations' working conditions when considering applying for a job (Cable & Turban 2003; Alniacik et al. 2012). According to earlier research, social media is increasingly used for employer branding purposes (Kaur et al. 2015; Neill & Moody 2015). It is also argued that the use of social media in employer brand work helps in building a good reputation (Sivertzen et al. 2013).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) define employer brand as the set characteristics of a company as an employer that differentiates it from its competitors, and employer branding as “a firm’s efforts to promote, both within and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes it different and desirable as an employer” (p. 501). Employer branding is used to attract the most qualified potential employees and to ensure that current employees are engaged in both the strategy and culture of the company, as well as to manage the awareness and perceptions of the company among other key stakeholders. Employer branding is founded on the resource-based view, which suggests that human capital brings value to the company and can lead to sustainable competitive advantage. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004.)

Previous research suggests that jobseekers compare the company’s reputation with their own values and personality, and are more likely to apply for a job in a company where their values fit with the values of the company (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). Sivertzen et al. (2013) studied which factors organizations should focus on in employer branding by analyzing the employee attractiveness scale (EmpAt) dimensions (adopted from Berthon et al. 2005) and the use of social media in relation to corporate reputation and potential employees’ intentions to apply for a job. Their findings indicate that the use of social media in employer branding could help organizations in building a good reputation, which was perceived as important since the researchers also found a link between a positive corporate reputation and potential employees’ intentions of applying for a job. Moreover, the employer branding strategies should concentrate on communicating three out of the five EmpAt dimensions perceived as most important for applying a job at a certain company: innovation values (possibility to participate in innovation activities), psychological values (employees feel confident and self-worth), and application values (employees have the opportunity to use their skills and learn). (Sivertzen et al. 2013.) Interestingly, however, the findings by Sivertzen et al. (2013) indicated a lack of importance of social values (work environment and relations to colleagues), therefore contradicting with some previous studies (see e.g. Turban & Greening 1997; Berthon et al. 2005; Alniacik et al. 2012).

Today, social media is widely used for employer branding purposes, such as for announcing open vacations, searching for job applicants, developing professional

networks (Sinha et al. 2012), and for presenting the company as a desirable place to work for both current and potential employees (Kaur et al. 2015). Indeed, in their study among public relations and human resources practitioners in the United States, Neill and Moody (2015) found that 90% of the survey respondents reported using social media to present their organization as a desirable place to work, and 70% said to use social media in the recruitment process. The use of social media in employer branding is evident in Finland, too, as the respondents in Jussila et al.'s (2014) study among B2B companies reported that the three most active types of social media usage were communications, marketing, and employer branding. In the same study, employer branding and recruitment appeared also as the social media use option with the most potential (Jussila et al. 2014). Additionally, Neill and Moody (2015) have identified nine key strategic roles in social media management, one of which is the employee recruiter, whose responsibilities have to do with employer branding activities, such as presenting the organization as an attractive place to work, screening job applicants, and recruiting new employees through social media.

Indeed, Kaur et al. (2015) suggest that companies should use multiple social media channels, such as social networking sites, blogs, YouTube, and internal social media applications to engage with their potential as well as existing employees. Social media channels should operate as a platform for hosting discussions e.g. on the company and the industry, and for sharing current job openings, videos, information about benefits offered by the company, as well as more informal content published by the employees (Kaur et al. 2015). Naturally, there are also drawbacks in using social media for employer branding and especially for recruitment. Neill and Moody (2015) express concern over the fact that the recruiters reported having received only limited guidance on the use of social media for screening job applicants, which might lead to the use of improper information (such as religion or race) in selecting candidates. Sivertzen et al. (2013) bring up the fact that using social media for posting job advertisements might result in a higher number of not qualified applications.

In addition to potential employees, current employees' perceptions of the company they work for and the way they communicate it outside have been proven to affect the

company's success. Thus, the next subsection presents existing literature on employee ambassadorship.

2.2.5 Employees as ambassadors of reputation

Recently, employees' work-related social media use has been acknowledged as an important factor in reputation management (Dreher 2014; van Zoonen et al. 2014). Employees are recognized as ambassadors whose actions online influence a company's reputation (Dreher 2014).

Harnessing employees as ambassadors of corporate reputation has several benefits. When employees publish and share company related content with their own networks on social media, it naturally increases the company's visibility and reach online (Dreher 2014). In addition, since employees know the company's business and culture well, information coming from them is perceived as more credible, authentic, and trustworthy than information on corporate accounts (Agresta & Bough 2011, p. 23; Helm 2011). In addition, as van Zoonen et al. (2014) point out, employees share company related information voluntarily and autonomously. This will more likely result in a more positive evaluation of the content's credibility (van Zoonen et al. 2014), and ultimately add to a more positive reputation for the company. Through social media, employees can build and sustain relationships e.g. with current or potential customers, investors, and future employees (Dreher 2014). Moreover, if a company has employees who are active on social media, they might become or already be social media "brands" themselves, which can contribute to the overall corporate reputation (Agresta & Bough 2011, p. 23).

In their study on employees' work-related Twitter use, van Zoonen et al. (2016) found that almost 80% of employees with Twitter accounts used their personal account also for work. Overall, work-related social media communication involves knowledge sharing e.g. about the profession in general, about the organization and its products or services, and about work behaviors, i.e. activities in the workplace that are performed by the employee (van Zoonen et al. 2016). Van Zoonen et al. (2016) observed that in work-related use, employees usually rely on pre-existing information by re-tweeting posts or

referring to external sources. Van Zoonen et al.'s (2016) findings also revealed that employees' Twitter use is often strategic, as they favor neutral tweets and use interactive features to increase the tweets' visibility. In addition, more than 30% of the employees' overall tweets were work-related, and almost half of those tweets were sent outside of office hours. This implies that allowing and encouraging employees' social media use certainly benefits companies at least in terms of increasing visibility (van Zoonen et al. 2016).

However, all of the above-mentioned benefits create also a risk on a company's reputation. Because everyone, including employees, have the opportunity to express their thoughts on social media, there exists a risk that confidential content ends up online, possibly causing loss of credibility, crisis or even lawsuits, and obviously damage to reputation (Dreher 2014). To some extent, this risk can be managed with social media policies and training sessions in organizations (O'Connor et al. 2016; van Zoonen et al. 2016). Neill and Moody's research (2015) on practitioners' social media related roles identified nine strategic roles, which include policy maker and policing. These roles exist specifically for developing policies on work-related social media use and educating employees about these policies (Neill & Moody 2015). However, not many organizations still seem to have implemented these kinds of actions (Verhoeven et al. 2012; Neill & Moody 2015).

To make the most out of employees' social media use, Dreher (2014) outlines eight management steps for communications:

1. Conducting research e.g. on employees' opinions and current use of social media as well as on their views on corporate culture to make strategic decisions.
2. Providing employees access to social media at the workplace. Preventing employees from using social media on their work computers does not remove the risks associated with social media use, but can cause indignation. Moreover, employees can anyway access social media on their smartphones.
3. Ensuring that also executives are committed to the process of developing employees' work related social media use.

4. Establishing a social media team to oversee the ambassador program and provide guidance and support for employees.
5. Making guidelines and policies on responsible social media use.
6. Reinforcing the guidelines and policies with adequate training on effective, non-risky work related social media communication.
7. Integrating the ambassador program into a company's overall communication strategy.
8. Setting up meaningful goals to manage employees' participation on social media, to measure the success of the efforts and to adjust them if necessary. (Dreher 2014.)

This section has presented previous research on the communicational practices used to manage corporate reputation. Even if companies cannot determine their reputation, they can try to influence stakeholders' perceptions by acting responsibly and communicating effectively. The expansion of digital communication has naturally affected communication practices, and much of the reputation management now takes place online. Online reputation management encompasses e.g. interacting with stakeholders online, creating interesting and credible content, and monitoring what stakeholders are saying, in the aim of enhancing trust and positive attitude towards the company. Next, the final section of this chapter introduces the theoretical framework of the study, based on the presented literature.

2.3 Theoretical framework of the study

This section introduces the theoretical framework of the present study, based on existing literature presented in the previous sections. The framework (Figure 5 below) connects the key concepts, i.e. reputation and reputation management, especially in the online context, to illustrate how the communications function is involved in managing corporate reputation.

As the previous sections have shown, reputation is defined as stakeholders' overall perception of the company, which is mainly based on the firm's behavior and

communication (Fombrun 1996; Gotsi & Wilson 2001; Aula & Mantere 2008). Good reputation is linked to higher financial performance (Roberts & Dowling 2002) and helps companies to attract best customers and most qualified employees (Dowling 2004; Chun 2005). This naturally makes reputation a high priority for businesses. Although reputation by definition does not belong to the organization and hence cannot be determined and controlled by the company, communications has an important role in influencing stakeholders' perceptions (Forman & Argenti 2005; Aula & Mantere 2008; Cornelissen 2014). With the spread and popularity of social media, communications' role in reputation management has, however, become even more challenging (Jones et al. 2009; Kietzmann et al. 2011; Dijkmans et al. 2015).

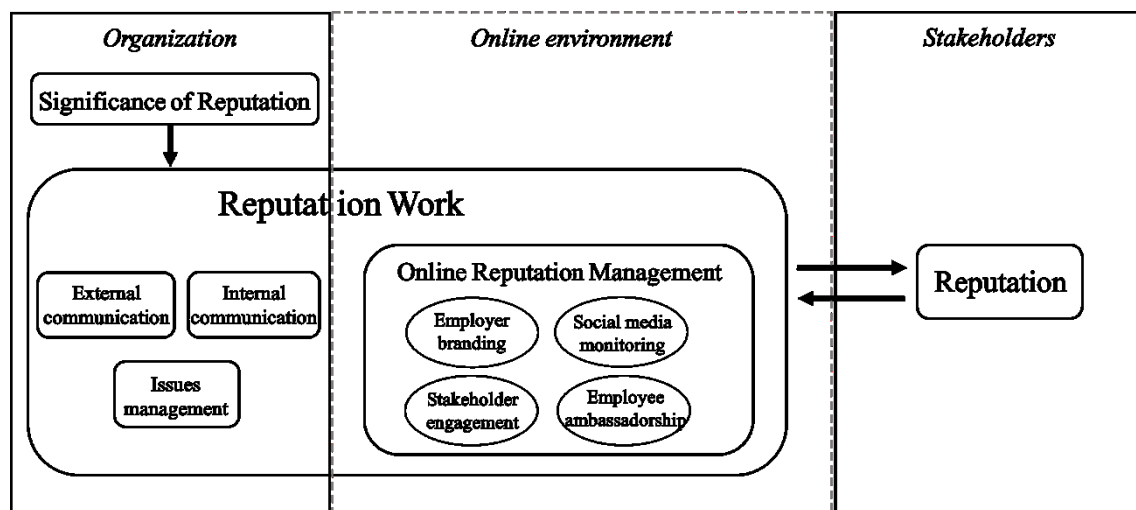


Figure 5. Theoretical framework

The present framework maps the reputation management process from the communications function's point of view. Although the present study is conducted in the B2B context, the framework can be applied for both B2B and B2C organizations. This is because the same reputation management practices apply, even though the importance between them may vary. While these themes and practices have received attention in previous literature, they have been studied mostly separately. This study intends to provide a more holistic view of the overall reputation building and management related responsibilities carried out by the communications function in Finnish B2B companies.

First, the framework takes the organization's own evaluation of the significance of the concept of reputation as a starting point, based on which the communicational actions are planned. Second, it introduces a new concept of *reputation work*. Reputation work comprises all the actions the CC function applies to manage reputation. The concept attempts to incorporate the elements that social media has brought along: rapid changes, uncertainty, and power moving from organization to stakeholders. In this environment the focus should shift from a more organization-centered and one-way reputation *management* thinking towards a more collaborative reputation *work* thinking. The new concept adopts the idea that organizations can influence their reputation with communication, but in today's digital environment, reputations are constantly worked and re-structured together with stakeholders.

Reputation work encompasses actions that are more in the organization's control and actions that are less in the organization's control. While most of the communication today takes place in the digital environment, the left side of the figure (the organization environment) illustrates reputation work practices that are more controlled by the organization itself. These include parts of external communication, issues management, and internal communication (see e.g. Dowling 2006).

The middle section in the figure illustrates the online environment, which is a common territory for both organizations and stakeholders. Online reputation management (see e.g. Jones et al. 2009), which today is a major part of reputation work, takes place mainly in this environment. The online or digital environment is a common territory since today, communication goes two ways between the company and its stakeholders (Swani et al. 2014). In fact, in the social media environment, stakeholders can to a large extent be the ones creating and discussing the content, instead of companies (Jones et al. 2009; Kietzmann et al. 2011). Succeeding in the online environment is crucial, since stakeholders increasingly form their perceptions and hence shape a company's reputation based on the content they encounter on social media (Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Online reputation management involves (1) social media monitoring and (2) social media participation through promoting the employer brand, engaging stakeholders and

harnessing employees as ambassadors. All of these practices are continuous and overlapping. Social media monitoring – i.e. looking into what stakeholders are saying about the company, competitors, and the industry in general – is vital in the social media environment where organizations have lost power over conversations concerning them (Jones et al. 2009; McCorkindale and DiStaso 2013, p. 503; Dijkmans et al. 2015). With effective monitoring, communications can identify the right issues (positive or negative) and the right arenas in time, and so manage reputation (Luoma-aho and Vos 2010).

Online reputation management demands also participation. Social media enables engaging stakeholders in the company's activities by facilitating relationship building, cooperation and dialogue between the organization and its stakeholders (Dijkmans et al. 2015). This is important since in the social media era, stakeholders want to engage and have companies to listen and respond to them, they no longer content themselves with simply receiving information (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Moreover, engaged stakeholders are more likely to create and disseminate (positive) information about the company, which contributes to the long-term reputation of the firm (van Doorn et al. 2010).

In addition, communications can participate and manage reputation online through employer branding. Current and potential employees have proven as stakeholder groups particularly important for reputation and vice versa – jobseekers use corporate reputation as a source of information about the organization and its working conditions when considering applying for a job (Cable & Turban 2003; Alniacik et al. 2012). Hence, researchers argue that developing a good employer brand facilitates achieving also a positive reputation (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Alniacik et al. 2012). Companies should use multiple social media channels to engage with their potential as well as existing employees e.g. by hosting discussions and sharing current job openings, information about working in the company, as well as more informal content published by the employees (Sinha et al. 2012; Kaur et al. 2015; Neill & Moody 2015).

With the recognition of employees' crucial role in reputation work, another important means arises: employee ambassadorship. Employees share company related information on social media voluntarily (van Zoonen et al. 2014), and therefore information coming

from them is perceived as more credible, authentic, and trustworthy (Agresta & Bough 2011, p. 23; Helm 2011). Credibility and trust are essential components in reputation (see e.g. Aula & Mantere 2008; Dowling & Moran 2012), and thus employees being ambassadors of reputation is likely to contribute to a more positive corporate reputation (van Zoonen et al. 2014). In addition, when employees publish and share company related content with their networks on social media, it increases the company's online visibility and reach (Dreher 2014).

The right side of the framework reflects the stakeholders' environment. That is where a company's reputation is ultimately formed, as reputation by definition is the stakeholders' perception of the company, which is based on the firm's behavior, communication, and the relationships between the firm and its stakeholders. The arrows reflect the essence of reputation work: while a company can try to influence its reputation by communicating certain things in a certain way, reputations are continuously co-created and re-structured by the company and its stakeholders, especially in today's online environment.

Next, the following chapter introduces the method and data used in the research. After that, the fourth chapter presents findings from the 11 research interviews on the communications function's role in reputation work.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the method and data for the present research. The first section introduces the qualitative research strategy and the research method adopted for this study. After that, the data of the study will be introduced by explaining what type of data were collected, as well as how, where and when the data were collected. Data analysis methods are also briefly introduced, and the third and final section discusses the trustworthiness of the study.

3.1 Qualitative research strategy

This section describes the characteristics of qualitative research, and the following subsection introduces the semi-structured thematic interview method adopted in this study.

For this Thesis, a qualitative approach is adopted. According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011), qualitative research is appropriate when the objective is to build an understanding of social behavior (p. 28). Bryman and Bell (2003) note that qualitative research often adopts an epistemological position described as interpretivist, which means that the objective is “*understanding* of the social world through an examination of the *interpretation* of that world by its participants” (p. 280, emphases added). Contrary to this, positivism (that is often adopted in quantitative research) applies the methods of natural sciences to *explain* human behavior (p. 14).

From the ontological perspective, qualitative research views social phenomena as being produced and constantly revised through social interaction, i.e. it adopts a constructionist approach (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 20). The other ontological position, objectivism, assumes that social phenomena exist independent of social actors – an approach often adopted in quantitative research (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 19). The present research approach assumes that organizations are co-created by the actors (constructionist) and the interest in this study is in understanding the organizations and practices through the

interpretations of their actors (interpretivist), which is why a qualitative approach is deemed more suitable for this study.

Another aspect to consider in research is the relationship between theory and research, which can be either deductive or inductive. Deductive theory is more common, and often used in quantitative research, since it takes existing theory in a particular domain as a starting point upon which hypotheses are based and then empirically tested (Bryman & Bell 2003, pp. 9-10). With an inductive approach on the other hand, theory actually is the outcome of observations through empirical research (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 12). An inductive approach is often used in qualitative research. The present research combines the two approaches, which according to Saunders et al. (2007, p. 488) can be beneficial since beginning the research from a theoretical perspective helps to link the study to previous literature and design an initial analytical framework, even though an inductive approach would later be applied. Indeed, in the present study, prior research is used to help define e.g. relevant interview questions, but as a new phenomenon is explored, an inductive approach is also necessary. Next, the specific qualitative method adopted in this study is presented.

3.1.1 Semi-structured thematic interviews

Out of numerous qualitative data gathering methods, semi-structured thematic interviews were selected as a suitable method for gaining more in depth insight on communications' role in reputation management. According to Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2011, p. 11), research interview and its various forms are probably the most used research method in the fields of behavioral and social sciences. The popularity of the method is based on its flexibility: it can be used for many purposes and conducted nearly anywhere, and it is the best method for gathering in-depth and even unexpected content (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 11). The characteristics of research interviewing include that the interview is designed beforehand, and that the researcher is acquainted with the topic of the research. In addition, the interview is initiated and directed by the researcher, who asks questions and listens while the interviewee answers (Warren 2001, p. 83; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 43). The purpose of research interviews is to bring forward the interviewee's thoughts,

experiences, understandings, and feelings (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 41). Indeed, it is important to note that the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to yield interpretations, and not generalizable facts or laws (Warren 2001, p. 83).

Research interviews can be categorized based on how structured they are, i.e. how precise questions are posed. Semi-structured interviews were used as the research method for the present study. Gillham (2005, p. 70) argues that because of its combination of flexibility and structure, the semi-structured interview method is the most beneficial way to conduct research interviews, and it often yields high-quality data. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011) also point out that out of the qualitative data-gathering methods, semi-structured interviews can be beneficial in revealing deeper meanings (p. 35).

Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011, p. 47) introduce semi-structured thematic interviews, where the same themes are discussed with all the interviewees, but the questions do not have to be posed in any specific way or order. The researcher does not give any answer alternatives for the interviewee, but instead the interviewee can freely describe his/her perceptions. However, to ensure all interviews touch similar content, additional questions may be posed if the interviewee does not spontaneously cover all areas of interest (Gillham 2005, p. 70). In the semi-structured approach, the course of the interview depends also on the interviewee and leaves room for interpretations and interaction (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, pp. 47-48). The method is not completely structured, as it does not contain precisely formulated questions, and it also differs from unstructured interview in that it does still have pre-determined themes that are common for all interviewees (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 48). Semi-structured thematic interviews were used as the data-gathering method in this study, since this method was deemed suitable for discovering the interviewees' real and deeper thoughts on corporate reputation management and the communications function's role in it. Next, the data and the interview scheme for the present study will be introduced.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

This section presents the data of the study. The first subsection describes what the data include and how they were collected, and shows the interview scheme. Following this, the second subsection presents how the data were analyzed.

3.2.1 Interviews with communications and human resources professionals

Case companies were selected based on an annual Reputation Study that measures the reputations of Finnish companies listed on OMX Helsinki. The reputation study has been conducted since 2001 by Finnish monthly business magazine *Arvopaperi* and communications agency Pohjoisranta Burson-Marsteller. The study is conducted among small-scale investors, who evaluate companies based on 27 statements related to six dimensions: corporate culture and leadership, success, public image, products and services, social responsibility, and readiness for change. The respondents evaluate the companies on a scale of 1 to 5, and the scores are adjusted so that each company gets an overall reputation score between 0 and 100 and a ranking on the reputation list. (See e.g. Hämäläinen 2012; Laitila 2015.) This reputation listing was deemed suitable for selecting the case companies, as is it the most extensive reputation study in Finland. Moreover, even though using only one listing conducted among a certain stakeholder group might not indicate the reputations of companies in the best possible way, it allows comparing companies as their reputations are evaluated on the same scale.

In order to get a diverse sample, representatives from companies with different levels of reputation were contacted by email. A total of 11 research interviews with representatives from six companies were held and recorded, as recording the interviews is deemed essential in research interviewing (Gillham 2005, p. 121; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 92). Three companies (A, B, and C) had a stronger reputation, i.e. they were in the top 15 of the above-mentioned reputation study (out of an average 77 companies) for eight consecutive years in 2008-2015. The remaining companies (D, E, and F) had a weaker reputation – i.e. they were either ranked below average in the same study over the same

period, or their reputation had significantly weakened over time. All six companies operated in the B2B sector and were listed on OMX Helsinki at least since 2004.

When selecting interviewees, the most important criterion is that the interviewees have experienced the same situation and so have knowledge of the topic under research (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 47). In the context of this study, all except for two of the interviewees worked as head of communications or head of HR in their companies, and the remaining two were direct subordinates of the communications and HR directors. Hence, all interviewees had more or less similar positions and possessed knowledge on reputation management and CC's responsibilities in their companies.

To gain a thorough view of the research topic, both communications and HR professionals from each company were interviewed, with the exception of company C, where the researcher was only able to interview the HR director. HR was included because of their close involvement in reputation work through employer branding, and their holistic view of the entire company and thus e.g. on the communications function's resources. 10 of the interviews were single interviews and one was a pair interview, amounting to 11 interviews and 12 interviewees in total. In the reporting of the findings, the statements of the participants in the pair interview are treated as one (F-Com). All interviews were conducted during January to March 2016 in Helsinki metropolitan area. 10 interviews were conducted face-to-face and one was done over the telephone, and they lasted from 29 minutes to 1 hour 20 minutes. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees were given a code (e.g. A-Com, B-HR) depending on their position and the company they worked for (Com = communications practitioner, and HR = human resources practitioner). Table 1 illustrates the company and interviewee profiles.

Table 1. Company and interviewee profiles

Company	Interviewee	Date of interview	Duration of interview
Company A	A-Com	11.1.2016	43:39
	A-HR	25.1.2016	51:25
Company B	B-Com	14.1.2016	01:19:42
	B-HR	10.2.2016	30:33
Company C	C-HR	28.1.2016	28:30
Company D	D-Com	14.1.2016	46:30
	D-HR	26.1.2016	31:56
Company E	E-Com	16.2.2016	41:38
	E-HR	16.2.2016	23:23
Company F	F-Com (pair interview)	10.3.2016	38:07
	F-HR	1.3.2016	40:26

The overall interest in the interviews was uncovering the CC function's role in reputation work, and the interviews consisted of six themes. The themes were altered a bit between communications and HR professionals, but basically were the same. As the interviews were conducted together with another researcher, they included themes that will not be discussed in this study. The themes were selected based on the research questions for the present study and for the other researcher's study, and based on previous literature. In the interviews, the interviewees were given the theme on which we wanted them to reflect, and additional questions were posed if needed to get clarification for some issues. The themes concerned the organization and resources of the CC function, CC's responsibilities, company's social media activities, and the perceived role of the CC function. Out of these themes, the present study focuses mainly on themes four and five, i.e. the responsibilities of CC and the company's social media activities.

The final interview question scheme was the following:

1. Background information
 - Interviewee's position and duties
2. Organization of the CC (and HR) function(s)
 - Centralized / decentralized
 - Teams
 - Changes during the last years

3. Resources of the CC (and HR) function(s)
 - Workforce
 - Budgets
 - Changes during the last years
4. Responsibilities of CC
 - Central responsibilities
 - Thoughts on reputation and reputation work (if has not come up yet)
5. Social media activities, e.g.
 - Channels and content
 - Social media team
 - Stakeholder engagement
 - Internal social media
6. Perceived role of the CC function in the company
 - CC's role and importance
 - Cooperation between the communications director and the executive team

3.2.2 Data analysis

All 11 interviews with communications and HR professionals were recorded and transcribed (see e.g. Saunders et al. 2007, pp. 474-478) within a few days of the interview, as is recommended by e.g. Gillham (2005, p. 123). The transcribed interviews were between five and 12 pages, adding up to 97 pages altogether. All spoken words were transcribed, but filler words that added nothing to meaning and hesitations were left out of the transcripts, as the purpose of the present study is to analyze the content and not the overall discourse of the interviews. In addition, the parts of the interviews that were outside the topic and the parts where the interviewees described their companies' operations were not transcribed, since they were not relevant or could not be included in the analysis. As all except for one of the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the transcripts were also written in Finnish. One interview was held in English, in which case the transcript was also written in English. In the analysis phase, the data was translated into English. The researcher is responsible for all interpretations made from the data, as

well as for the English translations of the interview quotes presented in the Findings-section.

The data were analyzed by using qualitative content analysis method (see e.g. Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2013). The qualitative analysis contains first breaking down and categorizing the data in order to discover the important features related to the particular study (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 143; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2013, p. 91). Based on that, an overall picture of the phenomena is formed and presented in a new perspective (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 143). Tesch (1990, cited by Saunders et al. 2007, p. 478) has grouped qualitative data analysis strategies into four categories: understanding the characteristics of language, reflection, discovering regularities, and comprehending the meaning of action. Out of these, the two latter approaches are adopted for the analysis of the data in this study.

The whole transcripts were categorized, but the further analysis included only the two themes relevant for the present study. The transcribed interviews were first coded by marking under which of the six main interview themes the data belonged. After that, the interviews were categorized under four main categories and 17 subcategories, out of which two main categories and 10 subcategories were analyzed for the present Thesis. Categorization allowed exploring and analyzing the data systematically and thoroughly, as noted useful by Saunders et al. (2007, p. 479). The analysis of the data combined deductive and inductive approaches, as some of the categories were derived from the predetermined interview themes and from the research questions (deductive), but some additional categories were included since more relevant themes emerged in the interviews (inductive) (see Saunders et al. 2007, p. 509). Each interview was first analyzed as a single case, after which all of the interviews were analyzed as a whole to find similarities and differences between the companies. Table 2 below illustrates the categories used in the analysis of the present data.

Table 2. Categorization of data

Category	Subcategory
Responsibilities	Most important responsibilities
	Principles for communication
	Corporate reputation
	Reputation building activities
Social media	Channels & content
	Engagement
	Employee ambassadorship
	Social media team
	Internal social media
	Changes & role

3.3 Trustworthiness of the study

This final section of chapter three evaluates the quality of the present study. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 290), adopting explicit evaluation criteria helps to ensure good quality for any research. In addition, they highlight that the evaluation of the study should happen continuously throughout the research process, and not just at the end of the project (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 290).

As Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011, p. 35) point out, although the interview method is considered to have many positive qualities, it has also certain limitations. First of all, the interview situation involves at least two individuals, who engage in social interaction. Hence, both the researcher and the interviewee bring their own interpretations into the situation. (Gillham 2005, p. 6.) The reliability of the interview content should also be considered carefully, as the interviewees might e.g. tend to give socially acceptable answers instead of describing their actual thoughts and feelings (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 35). Additionally, analyzing the interviews is always a process that is subject to interpretations made by the researcher (Gillham 2005, p. 6; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 35).

Easton et al. (2000) emphasize keeping in mind and avoiding three pitfalls of qualitative research: equipment failure (technical or human error), environmental hazards (e.g. loud background noise, interruptions), and transcription errors (misunderstandings or misinterpretations of speech). Also Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011, pp. 184-185) highlight that the quality of the study can be improved by making sure the interview equipment is in order, and that the transcription process is handled properly. In the interviews conducted for the present study, proper tape recorder was used to record the interviews, and it was tested before each interview. All except for one of the interviews were set in quiet meeting rooms, and the interviewees were indicated beforehand how long the interview would take in order to avoid interruptions. As was mentioned before, the interviews were conducted together with another researcher. Consequently, six out of the 11 interviews were transcribed by the present author and five by the other researcher, and the person transcribing had attended the interview. Naturally, some interviews had parts that could not be understood due e.g. to unclear articulation, but those were merely individual words or short sentences, which the researcher believes did not affect the analysis of the findings.

Reliability and validity are probably the most common research evaluation concepts, but they have originally been developed to assess quantitative research, and hence are closely related to measuring. However, they have been adapted to fit the qualitative methodology as well, although with slightly different meanings. (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 301; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 291; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 185.) Validity indicates the extent to which the research actually represents the phenomenon intended to be studied (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 292; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 187). Reliability means that should the research be repeated, it would yield the same results every time, and also that if another researcher replicated the study, they would come up with similar findings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 292; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, p. 186). As Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2011, p. 186) explain, this is problematic in qualitative research, since the presumptions of qualitative research rest on understanding human behavior to be context based and constantly evolving.

Indeed, because qualitative research, the present study included, often adopts interpretivist and constructionist positions as described at the beginning of this chapter, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 294) suggest adopting alternative evaluation criteria for qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited by Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 294) suggest replacing validity and reliability with the concept of trustworthiness, which contains four sub-concepts: credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. Next, the quality of the present research will be evaluated based on these criteria.

Credibility. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 294) explain that credibility refers to four things: the level of familiarity of the topic to the researcher, the sufficiency of data to merit the claims presented, quality of links between observations and categories formulated by the researcher, and the ability of another researcher, based on the data, to agree with the interpretations made by the researcher. For Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 301), credibility indicates how trustworthy and believable the findings are. The topic of the present research was not very familiar to the researcher before beginning the research process, but extensive examination on prior literature was carried out before conducting the interviews. Due to the relatively small size of the data and the qualitative nature of the study, special attention has been paid throughout the process as for not making any general claims based on the present data.

Dependability. This aspect focuses on the researcher's responsibility for explicating the research process, which should be "logical, traceable, and documented" (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 294). Also Bryman and Bell (2003, p. 289) emphasize that the research process should be recorded clearly, so that peers are able to evaluate it. In the case of the present study, the author feels that the criteria for dependability are met well. This chapter has explained the research method used, and presented detailed information on the selection of the interviewees, on their profiles, on the interview structure and situation, as well as on the analysis of the data, to ensure the reader that the study has been conducted logically. All the interviews have been recorded and transcribed, so the material is available for reviewing.

Conformability. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 294), conformability means “linking findings and interpretations to the data in ways that can be easily understood by others”. Bryman and Bell (2003, p. 289) add that the concept refers to that “the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith”, meaning he or she has not let personal opinions affect the conduct of the research or the findings. In the reporting of the findings of the present study, a large number of quotes from the interviews is provided to show that the ideas and interpretations stem from the data. In the interviews, the researchers were careful to let the interviewees explain their thoughts and not to provide their own opinions on the topic. In addition, attention was paid to that the data was analyzed based on prior research and the data itself, and not on the researcher’s personal opinions.

Transferability. The concept of transferability indicates the responsibility of the researcher to connect, to some extent, the study to prior research. Connecting the study to previous results does not mean it has to be a replicate of another study, but the author should express some similarity with other research contexts. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 294.) In this Thesis, links to previous research are provided in multiple chapters. Prior literature is covered quite extensively in chapter 2, and in the final section of that chapter, the author presents a theoretical framework, which connects the present study to earlier research on the topic. Moreover, in chapter 5, the findings are discussed in relation to previous research results.

This chapter has presented the semi-structured thematic interview method adopted in this study, described the 11 research interviews conducted and the data analysis method used, as well as discussed the quality of the present research. The next chapter will present the findings from the interviews with communications and human resources professionals.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings of the study. The chapter is divided into three sections, which describe findings related to the three research sub-questions: practitioners' perceptions of corporate reputation, communications function's tasks and responsibilities in reputation work, and social media communication in reputation work. All sections will contribute to answering the main research question of the present study:

What is the role of the communications function in corporate reputation work in Finnish business-to-business companies?

Chapter 5, Discussion, will then aim to offer a concluding answer to the main research question above. All 11 interviews have been analyzed for the presentation of the findings and relevant quotes are provided from the data to illustrate the findings. While the same themes were discussed in each interview, some interviewees engaged in deeper discussion than others regarding all or some of the interview themes. As a result of this, certain interviewees are quoted more often than others in this Findings chapter.

4.1 Perceptions of corporate reputation

This section covers the findings related to the first research sub-question, which concerned the interviewees' perceptions of corporate reputation and reputation work overall, as well as its significance in their companies.

Reputation signified a variety of qualities to the interviewees. Overall, most interviewees noted that reputation was regarded as highly important in their companies, and it was on top of the management's agenda. Additionally, four interviewees (A-HR, D-Com, E-HR, and F-HR) emphasized that reputation work was ongoing and patient, and not a project. Moreover, interviewees from all case companies agreed that reputation is based on actions, i.e. what the company is and what it does. E-Com and B-HR also acknowledged that reputation is created in the word-of-mouth communication by stakeholders, which indicates the uncontrollable nature of reputation. Indeed, since reputation was perceived

to be tied to actions, E-Com and C-HR questioned communications' possibilities to actually build corporate reputation. The following quotes demonstrate these ideas:

"It has a great significance, the reputation, it is on our top management's agenda and it is on the CEO's agenda." (D-Com)

"Reputation is created through actions, which is why communications' possibilities of influencing reputation are contradictory. If the CEO screws up or the company's products or services do not work, then all communications can do is to handle crisis communication well. ... But you can't actually build reputation with communications." (E-Com)

"Reputation comes from what the company actually is, and I think a long-lasting reputation cannot be built with communications alone if there is no truth behind the communication." (C-HR)

The interviewees, particularly HR representatives, emphasized that reputation originates from inside-out, which for them meant that the reputation that is communicated outside has to be real for the employees, i.e. they must be able to say what the company is like. The employer branding viewpoint – i.e. how the company is positioned in the employer market for current and potential employees, customers, investors, and other stakeholder groups – was highlighted especially by the HR representatives. A-HR also recognized that reputation is fragile, and even a good reputation can be destroyed almost overnight. These ideas can be seen in the following quotes:

"Reputation work is not just external communication and bringing front what is important to us and how we have succeeded but also making sure that the reputation we say we have is true and that every Company A's employee can say that this is what we are. In that sense it is very much a balance of internal and external, both are needed but it originates from inside-out, in this order." (A-HR)

“It [reputation] has a big impact on our recruitments, I look at it from that perspective. To be known plus that the perception would be positive, that helps us to get good applicants for the positions.” (B-HR)

Moreover, social media was highlighted as important in reputation work due to its ease of use, wide reach, and more informal nature. The following quote demonstrates this:

“Some way I think it is easier to deliver the true and honest image of the company [through social media], since it is not only the company’s communications department that informs [stakeholders] on their own website or other channels but it is based strongly on the employees’ pictures of what happens here and what is going on in company E’s employees’ lives.” (E-HR)

All six companies operate internationally, and interviewees from half of the case companies highlighted that their reputation in Finland was different from their reputation in other countries. The interviewees from four companies (A, B, D, and F) also brought up the impact of financial success or hardship, lay-offs, and overall negative publicity on corporate reputation. They were all perceived to affect reputation especially in Finland. In addition, the interviewees mentioned the company history’s influence on reputation. The following quotes demonstrate the perceived influence of lay-offs and geographical location on reputation:

“We have a problem with reputation partially because we are constantly in the press due to our lay-offs, we never make the news for e.g. recruiting a lot of people in Finland. If you have 100 positive things and one negative thing, the negative one is most likely to make the news.” (D-HR)

“In Finland, our reputation is probably built based on the products, and it is stronger here than elsewhere in the world because abroad, we are not visible to anyone else but our clients.” (B-Com)

The recognition of reputation being founded on actions, and communicating the truth were reflected in the answers that the interviewees gave to characterize the companies' communication principles. One or several of the following terms were used by all interviewees: truthfulness, consistency, single tone of voice, transparency and openness. Additionally, the interviewees highlighted the importance of real-time communication and dialogue instead of the one-way top-down approach. The emphasis on honesty is demonstrated by the following quotes:

"We have our own tone of voice at company A, and we aim at being fact-based and not bragging or using too many superlatives. If we say we are leading in some area, the text has to justify that statement." (A-Com)

"We have chosen 'open source culture' as one of our company themes, we talk about different openness themes, e.g. that we have lay-offs in our industry, we have been extremely honest about it both among our personnel and outside towards investors and other stakeholders that this is part of the industry change and it is impossible to avoid." (D-HR)

This section presented the interviewees' perceptions on the concept of corporate reputation. All interviewees noted that reputation was regarded as highly important in their companies, and they highlighted reputation being based on actions and originating from inside-out. Additionally, employer branding was brought up as an important part of reputation. Next, the following section introduces findings on communications' tasks and responsibilities in reputation work.

4.2 Communications' tasks and responsibilities in reputation work

The CC functions' overall responsibilities varied between companies but included a combination of external and internal communication, investor relations (IR), brand work, marketing communications, corporate responsibility (CR), employee engagement, public affairs, digital communications, media relations, reputation management and strategy communications. CC was organized as its own function in all companies except for

company B, where it was integrated with marketing since spring 2015. The human resources allocated to communications ranged from three employees to 19 employees. Table 3 illustrates the organization and activities of the CC function in the six case companies. These findings will be discussed next.

Table 3. Organization and activities of the communications function

	CC workforce	Brand board	Reputation rankings	Communications director on the executive team
Company A	19	Yes	Follow	Yes
Company B	3	No	Follow	No
Company C	4	No	-	No
Company D	13	No	Follow + own	No
Company E	5	Yes	Follow + own	No
Company F	15	Employer branding program	Follow	Yes

When explicitly asked about the CC function's responsibilities, only two of the interviewees (D-Com and F-Com) listed reputation management as one of communications' key responsibilities. However, at some point in the interviews, all communications directors noted that the CC function had an essential role in reputation work. The following quote by D-Com demonstrates the CC function's perceived role at Company D:

“If we think about this whole field [of communications], the prioritized areas are strategy implementation and getting people on board with that, and then reputation building and sustaining the reputation. That is where it is crystallized. There our impact is the biggest. And it has been recognized in the organization.”
(D-Com)

Additionally, brand management was mentioned as one of CC's key responsibilities in two companies (A and E), and these companies had established particular brand boards responsible for strategic brand-related alignments and decisions. The brand boards consisted mostly of representatives from communications, marketing, and HR. Moreover, company F had recently (at the end of 2015) launched an employer branding program to increase the company's visibility and attractiveness among potential employees, which was something they admitted having been too passive with in recent years.

The interviewees agreed that one of communications' primary tasks in reputation work was to increase awareness of the company by emphasizing the positive activities the company does. A-Com further elaborated that in company A, communications was responsible for building the corporate story through multiple channels in order to strengthen their key messages and show the value the company creates for its stakeholders. Additionally, E-Com brought up engaging in conversations with stakeholders as a means for communications to participate in corporate reputation work.

Issues management and crisis communication were also highlighted as important in reputation work by four companies (B, D, E, and F). For example, B-Com said that being prepared for a crisis formed the foundation for reputation work. Company B had outlined crisis management principles and had identified their most substantial reputation related risks, which were regularly scanned for by several departments, including communications. In addition to issues management, corporate responsibility was perceived to be closely linked to reputation work, and it was mentioned in the interviews by three interviewees (A-Com, D-Com, and F-Com). For example, company A had defined means with which to demonstrate their active corporate citizenship also outside the actual business (like cooperation with non-governmental organizations). D-Com described communications' participation in reputation work as follows:

“We have around 10 people here [in the CC team], and in practice what we do is reputation management. This takes a lot of time. The building of it [reputation] is influenced with proactive media relations and with the good stories we manage

to tell larger audience through media. But there is also a lot of preparing and we are glad that certain things don't come up in the media.” (D-Com)

As reputation was perceived to take shape from inside-out and to come real in the everyday work of the employees (see subsection 4.1), all interviewees naturally regarded internal communication as vital in building and managing their reputation, first internally, and ultimately towards external stakeholders. The interviewees felt it was important to ensure that internal communication was in line with external communication, and that the employees knew what the company's objectives were and what their role was in achieving them. Ensuring that the employees enjoyed working in the company was considered essential as the commitment of employees was regarded as an important reputational factor. This is reflected in the following quote:

“Reputation consists of many different things and I think one very important reputational factor is that company B's employees are highly committed to this company, there are people who have worked here for 20, 30, or even 40 years so their whole career, and that is something that helps in reputation. It is about being a good employer and operating in an interesting industry, people are committed to it and you treat them well.” (B-Com)

Especially the HR professionals brought up employer branding as a vital part of reputation work. In addition to ensuring the well-being of current employees, employer branding was seen as important in attracting the best future employees and affecting the overall corporate reputation of the company. The employer branding related activities the interviewees mentioned included participating in (recruitment) fairs and other events, cooperating with universities, organizing trainee programs and competitions to increase awareness of the company, and handling recruitment communication and the whole recruitment processes well. Several interviewees emphasized that the key was to be present on multiple forums and channels and to communicate the culture and work community of the company, and this was perceived to be effectively achieved through social media. Indeed, a majority of the interviewees emphasized the growing importance of social media communication in reputation work overall, as it was recognized as an

easy and effective way of increasing awareness and being in interaction with stakeholders. Social media use in reputation work is covered in more detail in section 4.3.

All interviewees except for C-HR reported that their companies follow their positioning in different reputation and employer brand rankings, such as the reputation study conducted by Arvopaperi and Pohjoisranta Burson-Marsteller. For example, company F used the rankings to reform their communications strategy and focus. B-Com, however, challenged the importance of these surveys, since the respondents were not considered key stakeholders for Company B. Contrary to this, companies D and E, in addition to following outside statistics, had conducted their own reputation studies among their stakeholder groups. The following quotes demonstrate the interviewees' thoughts on reputation studies:

“As a direct result of being more aware of those reputation studies and our key markets we were able to start our employer branding work. And use those specifics to help us focus on our key audiences that we know are going to be important for our future. So yes, we are [following the rankings], we could probably be more aware still, but we actually use them to reform our communications strategy and focus.” (F-Com)

“This is the third time we have conducted a study where we go through our personnel, our customers, our partners, the media, and investors. So all, like a 360 stakeholder analysis. Based on that we get a reputation index and that has gone to the right direction.” (D-Com)

The interviewees from three companies (A, D, and F) emphasized that reputation work is constant, systematic, and demands patience. However, company F acknowledged that they had been too passive and had neglected this course of action in recent years. Additionally, company B admitted having relied on that when they do things well, people will hear about them, but now recognized they could communicate more actively externally.

As we have seen, the interviewees reported communications to have many essential tasks in reputation work. However, two of the communications directors (B-Com and D-Com) expressed their concern as for not being granted membership in the executive team meetings, which was perceived to affect the efficient handling of the tasks described above, especially issues management. In only two companies (A and F, see Table 3 above), the communications director was formally a member of the executive team. The communications directors felt that being asked to participate in the meetings only when there was something related to communications on the agenda hindered the ability of communications to act proactively. The following quote illustrates this concern:

“All companies are organized the way they deem the best, and this is how it is done at company B, but what I fear is that when something actually happens, something big and negative, then how are we going to handle it if we have not been able to predict it because communications professionals have not been included in something or it is otherwise a difficult situation. And we are all around the world. I am not saying we [communications] are the only ones who can save the situation but we do have an important role when things start happening. And to be able to handle everything the best way possible requires that we have been able to prepare for it properly and that we have access to knowledge.” (B-Com)

This section presented findings on the reputation work related tasks and responsibilities conducted by the CC function. To summarize, most of the communications directors expressed that the CC function had an essential role in reputation work. The primary tasks of communications in managing the overall corporate reputation mentioned by the interviewees were the following:

- *increasing awareness of the company*: emphasizing the positive activities the company does on multiple channels
- *employer branding*: attracting the best future employees and affecting the overall corporate reputation of the company
- *internal communication*: ensuring that the employees know what the company's objectives are and what their role is in achieving them, as well as ensuring that the employees enjoy working in the company

- *issues management and crisis communication*: being prepared for possible crisis and handling them effectively
- *reputation studies*: following and possibly conducting own reputation studies to guide and support reputation management.

After mapping out the interviewees' perceptions on CC's overall tasks, the following section focuses on social media communication and introduces findings on the third research sub-question on social media use in reputation work.

4.3 Social media in reputation work

In an attempt to develop a further understanding of the communications function's role in reputation work, the present section addresses the third research sub-question and examines the social media activities of the companies in general and specifically in reputation work. The first subsection looks into social media teams, while the second subsection presents companies' social media channel selections and content, and finally the third subsection addresses the themes of internal social media communication and employee ambassadorship.

In general, all six companies reported using social media for their external communication, and five companies had adopted a social media platform for internal communication. Company A had started active and systematic work on digital channels approximately eight years ago, company B had made its first social media strategy five years ago, company F had established active presence on social media some three years ago, and company D had made substantial investments on their social media work two years ago. Indeed, most of the interviewees highlighted the growing importance of social media activity in overall corporate communication and also in reputation work, and agreed that the rapid evolution of social media demanded constant reacting and development.

The interviewees perceived social media as important in reputation work, since for many, the purpose of social media communication was to increase awareness of the company

by bringing forward the activities and positive things the company does. Many of the interviewees emphasized that social media communication had to be continuous, regular, and purposeful. In addition, dialogue as well as relevant and interesting content were mentioned by the interviewees. These ideas are reflected in the following quotes:

“The most important thing is probably that whatever we do, we commit to it for a longer period of time.” (A-Com)

“If we want to be visible [on social media] we have to get to the point where it [communication] is an ongoing, systematic, regular practice, so not waking up now and next time in the fall, that does not give a good impression.” (F-HR)

“There is no more one-way communication, but instead we have to be in dialogue [with stakeholders] and have relevant content.” (D-Com)

Table 4 below illustrates companies’ social media responsibilities and activities, which will be discussed in the following subsections.

Table 4. Social media use in reputation work

	Communications responsible for social media	Current social media channels	Internal social media platform	Ambassador program
Company A	Yes	LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram	Yes	No
Company B	No	LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Blog	Yes	No
Company C	Yes	LinkedIn, Facebook	No	No
Company D	Yes	LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Slideshare, Blog	Yes	Yes
Company E	Yes	LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram	Yes	No
Company F	Yes	LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Slideshare	Yes	Yes

4.3.1 Social media teams

In order to get a comprehensive picture of the companies' social media work, the interviewees were asked about the allocation of responsibilities concerning social media. The teams responsible for social media strategies and practical updating were organized differently in the six case companies. Concerning the department responsible for social media communication, five out of six companies indicated that *the ownership* of social media belonged to the communications function, even though the content was planned together with other departments, such as HR. Company B was the only one where social media was not dedicated to communications, but instead the responsibility was shared between the communications, marketing, and HR functions.

The sizes of the teams responsible for practical social media updating varied from one employee to four employees, but not all companies had designated a social media team. In company A, the digital communications team consisted of four people located in different parts of the world. This arrangement was created only recently, and before that company A had had a community manager in charge of social media. In company D, the responsibility over social media channels was assigned to two people in the CC team. Company E had one community manager in the communications function in charge of social media. In company B, the social media team consisted of a small group of people from CC, digital marketing, and HR. Companies C and F had not assigned social media as any particular people's responsibility, but instead it was included in everyone's tasks. Indeed, all interviewees emphasized that social media communication was not anyone's sole responsibility, but a joint effort. The following quote demonstrates this idea:

"I am actually pleased that we do not have a separate team but that it [social media] is seen as part of all of our communications and people's roles rather than as something separate." (F-Com)

The interviewees were also asked about social media monitoring in their companies. All interviewees mentioned some levels of social media monitoring, which for them meant that they follow conversations about them on social media. However, only two companies

(A and D) said they practice monitoring almost round-the-clock. In company A, the four members of the social media team were located on different time zones around the world, enabling constant monitoring and quick reacting. Additionally, B-Com noted that company B should engage in such practice, as it had marketing people located around the world. Round-the-clock monitoring was perceived as important particularly from the issues management viewpoint. The next subsection introduces the companies' social media channel selections and the content shared on each channel.

4.3.2 Social media channels and content

In order to map the six B2B companies' social media presence, the interviewees were asked to describe the channels their companies used and the content that was shared on those channels.

Social networking sites emerged as the most popular social media channels in external communication among the companies – all interviewees reported their companies used Facebook and LinkedIn, and all except for one company (C) used Twitter. Table 4 presented above in section 4.3 illustrates companies' social media channel selections. In all six companies, social media channels – especially Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram – were to a large extent used for employer branding purposes. Half of the companies identified LinkedIn as their most important or most active social media channel. In all six companies, LinkedIn was used as a channel for recruitment and for building the employer brand, and the content consisted mainly of job advertisements, company related news, and e.g. pictures illustrating what it is like to work at the company. Some companies even acknowledged social media in general, and especially LinkedIn, as their most important recruitment tool today. Additionally, LinkedIn was recognized as a professional channel, where experts were encouraged to engage in industry specific conversations. These ideas are reflected in the following quote on Company A's use of LinkedIn:

“LinkedIn is probably the channel we are most active on. ... We are probably going to make it even more as a recruitment channel and a channel for building our employer brand and for finding potential future employees. There are many

industry specific discussion forums [on LinkedIn]. We have encouraged our experts to join them and engage in dialogue with stakeholders.” (A-Com)

Facebook was used in a similar fashion to LinkedIn, i.e. for employer branding, promoting open vacancies and trainee programs, and sharing positive information about the company. Some companies reported using Facebook also for introducing new products. Mainly, Facebook was used as a channel for “extended internal communication” as E-Com expressed it, meaning that the channel included content that was interesting and relevant for current, former and potential employees, who were encouraged to like, comment, and share the posts.

Twitter was in use in five of the companies, and operated more as an extension of corporate communications. Twitter was perceived as a channel for distributing information efficiently to a wide audience, and the shared content included press releases, corporate news, and other official communications material. Additionally, as the companies were all publicly listed, Twitter was used for serving the investors real time by e.g. scheduling tweets from interim result launches. Open vacancies were occasionally promoted also on Twitter.

The three most popular channels mentioned above were complemented by Instagram, which the interviewees from three companies (A, B, and E) reported using, and one company (F) was investigating its possibilities for corporate use. Two out of the three companies had taken Instagram into use less than a year ago. A distinguishing feature with Instagram is its focus on images, and indeed, on this channel the interviewees highlighted high-resolution images and well thought out content that strengthened the desired brand image. In all three companies, Instagram, too, was used mainly for employer branding purposes. Companies had created specific hashtags, with which employees could show what it was like to work in the company. In some companies, particular hashtags were also used around campaigns and competitions. The interviewees whose companies had not adopted Instagram for corporate use pointed out the visualization of content (e.g. job advertisements) and gaining enough followers as main

challenges for using the channel. The following quote demonstrates the use of Instagram for building awareness through a competition in company B:

“Instagram is a new channel for us, we took it in use last summer by launching a campaign where we challenged our summer interns and also other employees to share pictures of their summer at company B by using a certain hashtag, and awarded five best pictures. We thought that it is also a good way of sharing information of what it is like to work at company B.” (B-HR)

Moreover, two interviewees (B-Com and D-Com) mentioned blogs as part of their companies' social media platforms. Blogs included texts on different company specific topics, written by experts working in the company. Company D's blog featured also a discussion forum with videos, interviews, and texts with guest bloggers, with whom the company aimed to create vivid conversation around specific themes. In both companies, blog content was shared on other social media channels to ensure a wide visibility.

Two companies' (D and F) channel selections included also slide hosting service Slideshare and video-sharing website YouTube. In the latter both companies' activity had increased due to a desire for moving more towards rich media production. Moreover, two companies (D and E) acknowledged that live reporting social media channels Snapchat and Periscope were emerging, but their attitudes towards them varied: while Company D was evaluating the channels' possibilities for their communication, Company E had deliberately chosen not to participate in them. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned having some other, country specific social media channels.

The interviewees were also asked about stakeholder engagement practices on social media. Two out of six companies (D and E) noted actively practicing engagement by engaging in conversations with stakeholders on social media channels and creating e.g. event pages on Facebook in which followers could join, and through which the company could gather the contact information of the participants. One company (E) had also done some research on who is following them on different social media channels. Additionally, two companies (A and F) recognized the importance of engaging their followers and

reported increasing their engagement practices in the future. One interviewee doubted that in their company (B), research on social media followers had been conducted and that they had made efforts in benefiting from the followers. Engagement practices did not emerge in company C's interview. Next, the final subsection of the chapter introduces the findings that emerged on employee ambassadorship and internal social media use.

4.3.3 Internal social media and employee ambassadorship

Internal social media applications were in use in five out of six companies – only company C had not implemented a social media platform across the entire organization, although there had been a few attempts for doing so. In general, internal social media operated as interactive platforms where employees could create open or closed groups and conversations around different themes. The most popular application among the case companies was a social network called Yammer, which three companies (A, E, and F) used to enable employees to share both work and non-work related content with each other. The level of usage varied between companies, and the biggest barrier for active usage seemed to be that the internal social media platform was separate from the traditional intranet, which was still used in all six companies. The next step in many companies appeared to be the integration of the two platforms. In fact, company F had already integrated their internal social media into the intranet, which had produced positive results as it had increased the use of the platform significantly. Company E reported doing the same in the near future, and company B was planning to do so. The benefits of internal social media platforms were associated with making communication more efficient and “lighter”, since it enabled sending less email. The following quotes illustrate the interviewees' thoughts on internal social media:

“... in Yammer you can create conversations only for your team and share information there instead of sending something as an attachment of an email. Also, it is an additional element for internal communication.” (A-HR)

“It [Yammer] is integrated with our new intranet, which was a really good decision. That is one of our rising stars. But it has not been utilized as well as it

could have been, and it is part of our social citizen program that we help people to better understand what it is all about, because it is a little bit hard for some people to understand what the purpose of that channel is.” (F-Com)

As mentioned in subsection 4.2, all interviewees brought up internal reputation work, i.e. internal communication as well as employee satisfaction and commitment, as highly important. In addition, they highlighted all employees’ roles in reputation work, as can be seen from the following quote:

“In my opinion, reputation work originates in every employee and every company C’s employee is doing reputation work. By that I mean how our employees act in customer situations and handle customer relationships. Going forward, how they talk about the company to their own stakeholder groups and everyone else, that is the most important reputation work...” (C-HR)

Moreover, six interviewees explicitly stated that their employees were encouraged to share their knowledge on external social media channels and enter into industry-related conversations, i.e. to act as ambassadors of reputation. Additionally, two interviewees recognized the power of ambassadorship although they had not encouraged employees to act as ambassadors. The benefits of ambassadorship had to do with increasing the visibility of the company and attracting new employees, clients, and even investors by posting content that was perceived more credible as it came from the experts themselves and not from the corporate accounts. The link between strong internal reputation and ambassadorship was elaborated by F-Com:

“And this is both, reputation on the outside but also on the inside. If people feel proud to work for a company, then we have also thousands of people who can be ambassadors for creating reputation, to attract new clients and also new talented people, possibly investors as well.” (F-Com)

Some of the companies were, however, ahead of others with the ambassadorship. The most progressive was company D, which had established an ambassadorship program led

by communications two years ago. The program included identifying people who could perform as employee ambassadors, then coaching and advising them on social media channels' nature and company D's objectives in them. If needed, help was also provided for writing the actual content. Also company F had recently established a thought leadership program in the aim of getting people to share things and to act as ambassadors for the company. The following quote illustrates the perceived benefits of employee ambassadorship:

“If you activate your own people to share and produce good content that is easy to share, it creates a huge impact. ... We have so many good examples of when people realize that they are also building their own professional brands while representing the company – it’s a win-win.” (D-Com)

Additionally, two companies (E and A) mentioned encouraging employees to be active on social media, although they had not created actual programs around ambassadorship. Company E was in the process of adopting a tool that would ease and encourage employees to share social media content published by the company on their own personal accounts. The two remaining companies (B and C) did not mention actively encouraging and advising employees on how to act on social media, although they realized the potential of employees sharing company related content and engaging in conversations as experts.

However, even if ambassadorship was not actively pursued in all companies, most interviewees said the companies did provide employees with some training and/or guidelines on proper and responsible social media behavior – e.g. at company E, social media guidelines were introduced as part of the orientation for new employees. Especially the HR representatives highlighted that employees should carefully consider whether their social media posts can be distinguished as their own opinions or are they easily mistaken as company statements. The following quotes illustrate the interviewees' thoughts on the topic:

“... in their private lives, everyone chooses the [social media] channels and how they act there and what type of profile they have, but it is good to think about whether people distinguish when you are talking as yourself and when you are using the company voice. It is a thin line, and it is not like we are always at work but at positions like mine the content is often regarded as company statements, and that is why I am rather quiet there.” (A-HR)

“And actually our philosophy is that we do not want to run our social media through guidelines and policies. What we want to do is more outreach work. We have had thoughts of having this educational campaign type of thing. ... Advising people how to do and how they can develop their professional presence on social media, or what is recommendable to do and what is not. Rather than saying do not do that. This would be a nicer way of doing that, so guiding them instead of telling them what to do.” (F-Com)

This section introduced findings on social media use in the six B2B case companies. In summary, five out of six companies indicated that communications had the responsibility for social media. The sizes of social media teams varied, but all interviewees emphasized that social media communication was not merely any one person's responsibility. All six companies had adopted at least two social media channels for their external communication: all companies used Facebook and LinkedIn, and all except for one company used Twitter. In all six companies, especially Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram were to a large extent used for employer branding purposes. Internally, social media platforms were in use in five out of six companies. An interesting finding was also the wide acknowledgement of the importance of ambassadorship in reputation work – the interviewees from four out of six companies said that their employees were encouraged act as ambassadors of reputation on social media.

This chapter has presented findings related to the three research sub-questions. The following chapter discusses the findings and aims to provide a holistic answer to the main research question of the study.

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to look into the topical theme of reputation management in the current, turbulent social media environment and to study if and how the communications function is involved in corporate reputation work. This chapter first discusses the research findings presented in the previous chapter by analyzing them in light of earlier literature introduced in chapter 2. After that, based on the findings from the three research sub-questions, the third section aspires to answer to the main research question of the study: *What is the role of the communications function in corporate reputation work in Finnish business-to-business companies?*

As mentioned above, this research aimed to study particularly how social media is used to manage reputation in the case companies, since social media is no doubt essential also in reputation work, and it has dramatically changed the way reputation is managed in organizations (Cornelissen 2014; Dijkmans et al. 2015). Indeed, the interviewees in this study stated that social media has become a platform for increasing awareness of companies and reaching target audiences effectively, as well as for enhancing especially the employer brand by producing more genuine and informal content. This finding supports the research framework (see Figure 5 in section 2.3), as communicating externally to raise awareness and generate appreciation towards the company among stakeholders is recognized as one of communications' primary reputation management practices also in earlier literature (see Dowling 2006).

Consequently, all companies reported some levels of activity on social media. This finding indicates that social media use among B2B companies has increased during the last few years, since Jussila et al. (2014) have found that in 2011, only less than 30% of Finnish B2Bs had adopted social media as part of their communication. As for social media channels, social networking sites – Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter – emerged as the most popular channels among the case companies. This is in line with Brennan and Croft's (2012) finding that LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and blogs are considered most important social media channels for B2B companies, although interestingly, blogs were mentioned to be in use in only a third of the case companies. The "ownership" of social

media is still trying to find its place in organizations – however, communications seems to be most often the department primarily responsible for strategic and practical social media communication, followed by marketing function in fewer companies (Verhoeven et al. 2012; Neill & Moody 2015). The findings from the present study support the earlier notion, as in all but one of the case companies, social media responsibility is dedicated to the communications function. Hence, communications is for the most part in charge of social media planning, updating, and monitoring, although the content is often planned also together with other departments, primarily HR and marketing.

The most interesting findings of this study relate specifically to online reputation management. The research framework (Figure 5 in section 2.3) of the present study suggests that online reputation management encompasses four important practices: employer branding, employee ambassadorship, social media monitoring, and stakeholder engagement. The findings of this study revealed that out of the four practices, the case companies are investing in employer branding and employee ambassadorship, but are lacking in effective social media monitoring and engaging their stakeholders. These issues will be covered in more detail in the following sections.

5.1 Investments in employer branding and employee ambassadorship

An emphasis on internal stakeholders', i.e. employees', significance for reputation emerged quite strongly from the present findings. The interviewees see reputation originating from inside-out, meaning that the reputation that is communicated outside has to be true also in the employees eyes: they must internalize it and agree with it. The interviewees consider reputation communication as a balance between internal and external communication, but originating from inside-out. Furthermore, ensuring that the employees enjoy working in the company is considered essential, since the commitment of employees is regarded as an important factor affecting overall reputation. This finding stands out, since the internal viewpoint is less discussed in earlier literature, although some studies have recognized the power of employees in reputation work, as reputation is affected in every interaction between the firm or its employees and stakeholders (Helm 2011; Olmedo-Cifuentes et al. 2014). In addition, internal communication has been found

to e.g. increase employee trust and commitment, and through that help to establish good reputation (Dortok 2006; Dowling 2006). The finding signals that the power employees have on reputation is being increasingly realized in organizations. An additional factor affecting the strong emphasis on employees' importance is likely the inclusion of human resources practitioners in the interviewees, because their expertise specifically relates to employees and their well-being.

Another finding highlighting employees' significance in reputation work is the emphasis on employee ambassadorship. This finding supports the research framework, but what is interesting is that the emphasis is so strong, since employee ambassadorship is a phenomenon that has only quite recently been gaining popularity among academia and practice (Dreher 2014). A majority of the interviewees mentioned that their employees are encouraged to share their professional knowledge on external social media channels and enter into industry-related conversations, i.e. to act as ambassadors of corporate reputation. Some companies have already even established employee ambassadorship programs, of which the communications functions are mainly in charge. The perceived benefits of ambassadorship include increasing the visibility of the company and attracting new employees, clients, and even investors, as the content is regarded to be more credible coming also from the experts themselves and not merely from the corporate accounts. Indeed, earlier literature supports this idea, since employees' work-related social media use is argued to add value for reputation and communication, particularly because of its credible and trustworthy nature (Helm 2011; van Zoonen et al. 2014). In addition, acting as ambassadors is considered to benefit also the employees, since they can demonstrate their own expertise and build also their own professional brands while representing the company. However, even if the findings suggest that the emphasis on promoting employee ambassadorship is strong, some companies have not engaged in this practice at all.

Encouraging employees to share company-related information on social media poses of course also risks, if confidential information ends up online or a person's own opinions e.g. on politics are taken for company statements. The findings from the present study suggest that to overcome this, companies – particularly the communications departments

– organize training and/or provide guidelines for the employees on proper and responsible social media behavior. Indeed, previous research on employees’ work-related social media use emphasizes the importance of thorough and effective social media policies and training sessions in organizations in order to avoid problems caused by irresponsible social media behavior (O’Connor et al. 2016; van Zoonen et al. 2016). In relation to ambassadorship, communications practitioners see their role ultimately as enabling and facilitating conditions for employees to act as (online) ambassadors of reputation.

In addition to current employees, the findings of this study suggest that potential employees are considered important for reputation. This became evident in that the interviewees, especially the HR practitioners, regard employer branding as an important part of every company’s reputation work. This is natural especially in this era when work is getting increasingly knowledge-intense, and companies want to attract the most qualified workforce. Moreover, Sivertzen et al. (2013) have found that several employer attributes contribute positively to corporate reputation, which in turn positively links to potential employees’ intentions to apply for a job. In the present study, several interviewees emphasized that the key in their employer branding efforts is to be present on multiple forums and channels and to communicate the culture and work community of the company. This is perceived to be effectively achieved through social media and thus, companies’ social media channels – especially Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram – are to a large extent used for employer branding purposes. The use of social media in employer branding and communicating the company culture support the findings by Sivertzen et al. (2013), who suggest that to support positive corporate reputation, companies should communicate innovation values (possibility to participate in innovation activities), psychological values (employees feel confident and self-worth), and application values (employees have the opportunity to use their skills and learn), especially through social media. However, the findings by Sivertzen et al. (2013) indicated a lack of significance for reputation in communicating work environment and relations to colleagues, which the interviewees in this study held important. This contradiction is somewhat surprising, as the two studies have both been conducted in the Nordic countries (Norway and Finland), which could be assumed to have pretty similar working cultures.

The case companies in this study have largely realized the power of employees on reputation. A majority of them is investing in the online reputation management practices of employee ambassadorship and employer branding, as the research framework suggests they should. However, the case companies seem to be lacking in the other two practices, i.e. social media monitoring and stakeholder engagement. These will be discussed in the following section.

5.2 Room for improvement in monitoring and stakeholder engagement

Every external encounter between the organization and its stakeholders, whether it be advertising, press releases, interviews, customer service phone calls or social media conversations, also serves as a means for relationship building. As reputations are based on the perceptions of stakeholders, establishing good relationships with key stakeholders is considered key in maintaining a favorable reputation (see e.g. Forman & Argenti 2005; Murray & White 2005; Malmelin 2007). However, these type of ideas did not strongly emerge in the findings of the present study.

Indeed, even if building relationships and engaging stakeholders in the company's activities on social media has been argued to be key in strengthening reputation (Dijkmans et al. 2015), the findings suggest that Finnish B2Bs are not very far with it yet. Although stakeholder engagement is recognized as important for reputation in over half of the case companies, only one third actually try to engage their stakeholders in practice e.g. by having conversations with them on social media. Therefore, this finding does not fully support the research framework, where stakeholder engagement is presented as one of the main practices of online reputation management. The finding is somewhat surprising, as previous literature also suggests that in the B2B sector, social media is considered a platform particularly for relationship building and brand development (Michaelidou et al. 2011; Brennan & Croft 2012; Swani et al. 2014). Based on these findings it seems that the B2B case companies are still considering social media as another communication channel for merely sending messages (like their own websites or

traditional media), when in fact social media is characterized particularly by two-way communication, engagement and co-creation.

Consequently, on social media, also the power over content is divided between organization and stakeholders. In the environment where organizations have lost power over conversations concerning them, several definitions of online reputation management highlight the importance of social media monitoring (Jones et al. 2009; McCorkindale and DiStaso 2013, p. 503; Dijkmans et al. 2015). All interviewees mentioned some levels of monitoring, which for them meant that they follow conversations about the company on social media. However, in only a minority of the case companies, monitoring was practiced round-the-clock. This was achieved e.g. through organizing the social media team so that the members were located on different time zones around the world. This finding on the lack of comprehensive monitoring does not support earlier literature on online reputation management and the research framework, where monitoring has been highlighted as crucial. Therefore, it is also a somewhat worrying finding. As the companies operate increasingly internationally, effective monitoring becomes more and more important. On social media, information can originate and spread anywhere at any time, and companies need to be able to react quickly. If a crisis emerges e.g. in North America during the day local time and hence in the evening in Finland, it might be too late to react when the Finnish people get to work the next day and see it. On social media, the crisis can have spread extremely wide by then, making it harder to recover from possible reputational damage.

After discussing the findings related to online reputation management practices, the following section builds on them and concludes this chapter by discussing the main research question, i.e. the overall role of the communications function in corporate reputation work in the B2B case companies.

5.3 Communications function's role in reputation work

In light of the findings from the present study, it appears communications does have an essential role in corporate reputation work in Finnish B2B companies, even though the

findings also suggest that reputation management is still not considered as one of communications function's key responsibilities. This seems to be consistent with recent findings on communications' tasks in Finnish organizations: in 2015, only 37% of the participating communications professionals stated that reputation and brand building were among their most important tasks (Taloustutkimus 2015). However, reputation management has clearly increased in importance as the percentage in the study has doubled in two years (2013: 18%), but nonetheless under half of the organizations consider it as one of communications' most essential responsibilities. In addition, based on the findings, the roles of communications vary: it can have a proactive and important role in building, promoting and sustaining reputation, or more of a perpetuating role in the maintaining of current reputation by merely distributing information and being well prepared for issues and crises.

As described in chapter three, the data of the present research consisted of companies with stronger and weaker reputation rankings, based on the annual reputation study by Arvopaperi and Pohjoisranta Burson-Marsteller. The findings of the present study indicate that the social media performance of some companies (A, D, E, and F) is more extensive and systematic than of other companies (B and C), including practicing some stakeholder engagement and taking advantage of employee ambassadorship. In addition, it seems that companies with generally weaker reputations (D, E, and F) are putting on average more effort in their social media communication. These companies' reputations are currently not at their desired levels, and therefore it appears that communications plays a greater role in building reputation than in maintaining the present, good reputation. Additionally, however, one case company with a strong reputation (A), uses social media comprehensively and systematically. Interestingly, at the time of the interviews, some companies (A, D, and E) were in the middle of repositioning their companies in the eyes of stakeholders as they were associated strongly with their history, although their operations had recently changed. Companies with good reputations and stable operations (B and C) were relying more on their existing reputations and believed that doing their work well was enough to maintain it. Thus, the findings suggest that the stronger involvement of the communications function, especially related to social media

communication, could be associated with the objective of reinforcing or rebuilding reputation.

Overall the findings indicate, in line with previous research, that communications does have an important role in corporate reputation work. Primarily, communications' role seems to be to increase awareness of the company among stakeholders by communicating its (positive) actions and handling possible issues effectively through various channels, especially on social media, which also supports previous research on CC function's role in corporate reputation management. What the present study adds to existing literature, is the increasingly stronger internal emphasis and the communications function's role in creating favorable conditions for employees to be ambassadors of reputation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter of the Thesis summarizes the research and its main findings. In addition, the second section introduces some practical implications regarding communication in reputation work. Following that, the third section evaluates limitations of the present study, and the fourth section concludes this Thesis report by presenting suggestions for further research on reputation work.

6.1 Research summary

The objective of this research was to understand how communications and human resources professionals perceive corporate reputation and how the communications function is involved in managing reputation in Finnish public business-to-business (B2B) companies. The research topic stemmed from the increased attention that corporate reputation has in recent years received in both academia and practice (see e.g. Helm 2007; Shamma 2012). Today, in the world of numerous competing products and services, the success of a company is increasingly determined by what customers and other stakeholders think about it – in other words on the company's reputation (Malmelin 2007). Even though reputations are formed among stakeholders and cannot be determined by companies, stakeholders' perceptions can try to be influenced through effective communication on social media and other platforms (Forman & Argenti 2005).

This research has contributed to increasing the understanding of the multidimensional relationship between communications and reputation management in Finnish B2B companies, particularly in the complex environment where social media has changed stakeholder practices and behaviors. The focus was on B2B companies, since the rapid spread of social media is now demanding also them to engage in it and has consequently changed their communication. Therefore, it is important to study the social media use of B2Bs in general, and also related specifically to reputation management, since relationships and reputations' impact on purchase decisions are probably even more important in the business-to-business sector than in the business-to-consumer sector. Moreover, prior research has been conducted on reputation as a concept and on the overall

importance of communications in reputation work, but hardly any empirical studies have existed on the actual reputation management related activities, especially on social media (see, however, Floreddu et al. 2014 & Dijkmans et al. 2015). Thus, this research has contributed to the gap between the identified importance of the CC function in reputation work, and descriptive accounts of its actual activities in practice. The main research question of the study was the following:

RQ: What is the role of the communications function in corporate reputation work in Finnish business-to-business companies?

In order to be able to provide a comprehensive answer to the main research question, the topic was approached with three sub-questions on different themes. The sub-questions that the current study set out to answer were:

SQL: How do communications and human resources professionals perceive corporate reputation?

SQ2: What are the communications function's tasks and responsibilities in reputation work?

SQ3: How is social media used in the reputation work of business-to-business companies?

In this study, semi-structured thematic interviews were selected as the data-gathering method, as they are generally considered a beneficial method for gathering in-depth and even unexpected content on a topic (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011). A total of 11 research interviews with representatives from six B2B companies were held and recorded. To gain a thorough view of the research topic, the interviewees consisted of both communications and HR professionals.

Since reputation is defined as stakeholders' perception of the company, it cannot be determined and controlled by the company (Fombrun 1996; Gotsi & Wilson 2001).

However, the perceptions can try to be influenced with communication (Forman & Argenti 2005; Aula & Mantere 2008). Today, most communication takes place in the digital environment, where it goes two ways between the company and its stakeholders (Swani et al. 2014). In fact, on social media, stakeholders can for the most part be the ones creating content and originating discussions, instead of companies (Jones et al. 2009; Kietzmann et al. 2011). The research framework of the present Thesis suggested that online reputation management involves four main practices: social media monitoring, employer branding, stakeholder engagement and employee ambassadorship – all of which are continuous and overlapping. Ultimately, however, a company's reputation forms among stakeholders. While a company can try to influence its reputation by communicating certain things, reputations are continuously co-created and re-structured by the company and its stakeholders, especially in the digital environment.

In relation to the first sub-question on corporate reputation and its significance for companies, the findings reveal that the existence of reputation was indeed acknowledged, and the interviewees noted that it was deemed highly important in their companies. They also regarded reputation being based on actions and therefore it cannot completely be in their control. These findings are consistent with earlier literature, which emphasizes that reputation is formed among stakeholders (see e.g. Fombrun 1996; Gotsi & Wilson 2001) and based on the company's actions (e.g. Aula & Mantere 2008, p. xi; Dowling and Moran 2012). In addition, the interviewees highlighted that reputation originates from inside the company through its employees – a finding that has been less discussed in previous corporate reputation research.

Sub-question two concerned reputation work related tasks conducted by the CC function. In line with e.g. Dowling (2006), the findings of the present study indicate that along the key tasks of communications are *increasing awareness of the company among external stakeholders* (emphasizing the positive activities the company does on multiple channels), *internal communication* (ensuring that the employees are familiar with the company's objectives and their role in achieving them, as well as ensuring that the employees enjoy working in the company), and *issues management and crisis communication* (being prepared for possible crisis, scanning for issues, and handling them

effectively). Additionally, the interviewees perceived creating and promoting an attractive employer brand as an important practice affecting the overall corporate reputation.

Sub-question three looked into social media use in the companies' reputation work. All case companies had established social media presence on at least two social media channels, so the findings would suggest that social media use among Finnish B2B companies has increased during the last few years (see Jussila et al 2014). The finding on social media channels' "ownership" is consistent with the findings of e.g. Verhoeven et al. (2012) and Neill & Moody (2015) in that in most organizations, communications has the primary responsibility for social media, although in close collaboration with other departments such as marketing and HR. Based on the findings of the present study, B2B companies use social media channels and especially Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, for the most part for employer branding. An interesting finding was also the wide acknowledgement of employees and their work-related social media use's significance in reputation work. This employee ambassadorship practice has only quite recently started to gain attention and popularity among academia and practice (Dreher 2014). However, in contrast to a rather wide body of previous research on the influence of active monitoring (see e.g. Jones et al. 2009; McCorkindale and DiStaso 2013, p. 503) and stakeholder engagement (see e.g. Dijkmans et al. 2015) on reputation, the findings of the present study suggest that these practices are not as actively practiced among B2Bs as they maybe should be.

Overall, the findings of the present study seem to support previous research in that the communications function is indeed involved in corporate reputation work, although the role varies. Primarily, communications' role seems to be to increase awareness of the company among stakeholders by communicating its (positive) actions, to be prepared and to handle possible issues effectively, and to ensure favorable conditions for employees to act as ambassadors of reputation. Indeed, what the findings of the present study emphasize more than previous literature are particularly the importance of internal communication and employee ambassadorship. Moreover, the findings seem to suggest that the involvement of the communications function in reputation work (especially on

social media) is stronger in companies that are currently trying to reinforce or rebuild their reputation than in companies that are merely trying to maintain their existing (positive) reputation. The next section introduces some practical suggestions based on the findings.

6.2 Practical implications

The findings of the present study provide managerial and practical implications for managing corporate reputation within communication, particularly in rather large B2B companies. Today, in the world of numerous competing products and services, reputation can be the factor deciding the purchase, which underlines its importance for companies. Even though a company cannot determine its reputation, it can try to influence it with its own actions.

Social media has become a platform where stakeholders search for and share information on companies, and they also form their perceptions largely based on that information. On social media, reputation has to be earned again every day. B2B companies have in general been slower to adopt social media than B2Cs, but now it seems they are also starting to realize its importance and potential. Based on the findings of this study, three main suggestions especially for B2B companies' online reputation work arise: (1) exploiting employees' work-related social media use, (2) increasing social media monitoring and measuring, and (3) emphasizing relationship building and stakeholder engagement online.

Based on the findings of the present study, it seems that a company's own employees are considered an effective communications channel affecting the overall reputation of the company. Employees' role in reputation work is particularly important in the social media environment. Most employees are already using social media for personal purposes, and many are likely to share also work-related content, even without encouragement. This possesses opportunities for companies, which some companies have already realized. Harnessing employees to purposefully share work-related content on their online channels – i.e. creating employee ambassadorship programs – can help companies earn

more positive reputation among stakeholders, as information coming from real people instead of corporate accounts is generally considered more credible. Ambassador programs appear to be usually led by communications, in collaboration with the HR department. In order to benefit from ambassadorship as much as possible, companies should ensure sufficient training on social media channels' functions and nature, as well as on responsible social media behavior, and provide coaching and support when needed.

What the findings of this study indicated that companies do not do, is actively monitoring the social media environment and measuring their social media efforts' success, even though the interviewees expressed that they would deem it important. As the social media environment is so hectic and fragile, but also vital in terms of reputation, companies should definitely invest more effort in monitoring and measuring it. In large, multinational companies like the case companies in this study, social media monitoring could be arranged to cover for at least a wider time span than a normal workday, if not 24 hours. Monitoring means actively observing conversations on social media, but also carefully listening to stakeholders' opinions and needs. Effective monitoring can foster new ideas, prevent issues from arising, and help to minimize crises' negative effects on reputation. In terms of measuring, working out e.g. what type of content stakeholders are most responsive to and through which channels helps the company to reach its target audiences and provide content that best aids in acquiring strong reputation.

Another suggestion that can be drawn from the findings is increasing online relationship building and stakeholder engagement efforts. These were not actively pursued in companies, but previous research highlights their importance for positive reputation, especially in the B2B sector. In order to form relationships and achieve engagement, companies need to move from considering social media as one-way message transmission channels towards understanding its co-creational nature. Moreover, to get stakeholders to engage on social media, companies should devote to creating relevant and interesting content (see Verhoeven et al. 2012; Pereira et al. 2014), initiate discussions around current topics, and encourage stakeholders to share their own experiences or posing questions (see Heinonen 2011), to name a few measures. In addition, being transparent is likely to help in acquiring positive relationships and strong reputation. In order to achieve

transparency and a more personal touch, McCorkindale and DiStaso (2013) suggest companies could name the people who manage the social media accounts, e.g. Twitter. Next, the following section addresses the limitations of the present study.

6.3 Limitations of the study

As with any research, the present study is subject to limitations. Studying corporate reputation is challenging, because as Cornelissen et al. (2006) point out, acquiring strong corporate reputation depends on a wide range of factors, and hence there is no way of accurately confirming particular aspects of communications that influence reputation. Nevertheless, since it is widely agreed that a firm's reputation is highly influenced by the effectiveness of the corporate communications function and its specific activities (see e.g. Forman & Argenti 2005; van Doorn et al. 2010; Dreher 2014), the topic is relevant and interesting to study. Another challenge arose because of the lack of prior research in the field of online reputation management, especially in the B2B sector. Overall, B2B social media research is still fairly scarce. Therefore, it was difficult to find studies on reputation work on social media in B2B companies, leading to the fact that the previous literature presented in this Thesis has mostly been conducted in the B2C sector.

The overall trustworthiness of the study, including limitations in relation to the semi-structured interview method used in this study and the interpretations made by the researcher in the analysis, has already been addressed in more detail in section 3.3. The data of the study – 11 interviews and six companies – is quite narrow, and including more companies and interviewees would have contributed to more comprehensive findings on reputation work. However, the data do give an overview on communications function's participation in reputation work in public Finnish B2B companies. As for the interviewees, the communications directors were not always completely familiar with the practical social media activities conducted in the company, so it might have been fruitful to interview also communications specialists. However, interviewing both communications and HR professionals gave a comprehensive outlook on the communications functions role in reputation work.

Using only one reputation listing upon which the companies' reputations were based does not perhaps indicate their overall reputation, as the respondents in the Arvopaperi and Pohjoisranta Burson-Marsteller's reputation study are mostly small-scale investors. Overall, reputation rankings in general have been criticized e.g. for focusing too much on financial performance. However, using only the one reputation study allowed comparing companies, as their reputations varied on the same scale.

As in other qualitative research, the findings of this study should be interpreted carefully, to represent the six Finnish public B2B companies interviewed. The case companies were all public companies listed on Helsinki stock exchange, which is reflected e.g. in their communication that is largely targeted towards investors. Moreover, as social media and its use in organizational communication and reputation work are constantly developing, the findings and arguments presented in this research report will need to be reviewed in the future. For now, however, they provide interesting insights into the topical theme of social media and its use in reputation management in Finnish B2B companies. Reputation management is indeed an important topic, and there exist numerous interesting avenues for further research. Some suggestions will be presented in the following section.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

This final section of the Thesis provides recommendations for further research on reputation work. Due to the current lack of literature on the actual communicational activities used in corporate reputation management, the Corporate Communication discipline could benefit from further research in the field.

As the majority of the case companies in this study had started investing more in their social media activities only over the past few years, the influence of those efforts in the reputations of companies is not yet visible. Thus, in the future, it would be useful to study whether those investments and activities have, indeed, had an effect on the reputations of companies. Moreover, as this research was conducted in Finland, research on communications' role in reputation work in and between other countries would surely provide interesting comparisons.

This research studied communications' participation in reputation work on a general level, providing an overview of the various practices and activities pursued in Finnish B2B companies. Therefore, interesting avenues for future research exist in studying certain activities more in depth. One example could be employee ambassadorship, which emerged as a topical practice becoming more common and more important in organizations. Relating to employees' work-related social media use, another interesting topic could be found in studying the stakeholders' side and how they perceive content coming from the organization's social media accounts versus directly from the company's employees, and how it affects their evaluation of a company.

The findings of this research raised employees in the center of reputation work. In addition to employee ambassadorship, it could be interesting and beneficial to study how the employees actually form their own perceptions of their employer's reputation, and if the perceptions are consistent throughout the organization. Top management naturally has a desired reputation in mind, which they try to implement both inside and outside the organization. Further studies on corporate reputation could look into (1) how do they manage that, and (2) is the top management's view of the ideal reputation similar to the reputation the employees are communicating to their stakeholders.

Naturally, as this research was conducted in the B2B sector, it could be interesting to do similar studies on the B2C sector in order to identify similarities and differences in the reputation management practices. In addition, as the companies studied in this research were publicly listed, their communication is highly affected by laws, regulations, and the overall ethics of investor communication. Would communication and reputation management practices differ if the case companies still operated in the B2B sector, but were privately held? Moreover, this research has increased knowledge on the social media use of B2B companies overall. Today, social media is already considered mandatory and beneficial for all companies, but B2Bs have received much less attention in previous organizational social media research. All B2B social media research is therefore welcome.

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